THE EPISTOLARY FORM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I argue the use of the epistolary form in twentieth-century fiction reflects the major principles of the modern and postmodern literary movements, separating epistolary practices in fiction from their real world counterparts. Letters and letter writing played an important role in the development of the English novel in the middle eighteenth century. A letter is traditionally understood to be a genuine depiction of what the writer is currently feeling, and when used in fiction, letters become a way to represent characters’ internal states and to present accounts of recent events. Thus letters in eighteenth-century fiction establish that language can clearly reveal the subjective experience. The modernists, however, believe that all knowledge, even subjective knowledge, is limited and after World War I, lose confidence in language’s ability to describe the modern era. They revive the epistolary genre and use letters in their works precisely to reject the conventions that had been founded in the eighteenth century. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the use of letters in fiction continues to evolve. Postmodern authors use the epistolary form to investigate the ways language complicates representations of the subjective experience and to explore the letter’s relationship to different states of being. The letter in fiction, then, can be adapted to express different theories about art and literature. Thus letters are used in twentieth-century literature not so much because they are a vital part of a media ecology, but
because their relationship with actual media is dissolving. In addition, comparing the functions of letters in the eighteenth century and the functions of letters in the twentieth century demonstrate that using the letter in fiction automatically puts novels in conversation with texts from previous literary eras.

The majority of epistolary studies have discussed the relationship between letters and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. My study argues that despite their apparent anachronism, letters are a dynamic literary form that has contributed to the evolution of fiction over the last 100 years.
To Pat, the one who understands me
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………………….ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication…………………………………………………………………………………………iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments……………………………………………………………………………………v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita……………………………………………………………………………………………………viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapters:

1. **Introduction: “It isn’t going to be what we expected”:**
   
   The Surprising Use of Letters in Twentieth-Century Fiction………………………………1

2. **“Till this moment I never knew myself”:**
   
   Letters in Nineteenth-Century Fiction .................................................................24

   The Integration of the Epistolary Form:
   
   Pride and Prejudice and The Moonstone...............................................................27

   The Questioning of the Epistolary Tradition. .........................................................51

3. **“Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost”:**
   
   Modernism and The Epistolary Form.................................................................70

   The Personal Document Becomes Impersonal.........................................................74

   Letters and Lying.................................................................88

x
The Struggle to Write.................................................................100
The Epistolary Form and Art......................................................103

3. “All the world’s in want and is writing a letters”:
Joyce’s Experiments with the Epistolary Form..............................118
Dubliners.............................................................................119
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man........................................124
Ulysses...............................................................................127
Finnegans Wake....................................................................149
The Letter as Literature..............................................................165

4. “You’ve got mail”: The Epistolary Tradition in the Postmodern Era........................................................................171
The Problems with Language....................................................173
The Fragmentation of the Storyworld..........................................185
Letters and External Readers....................................................198
Communication in the Postmodern Era......................................207
Conclusion: “There’s something stuck here”:
The Future of the Letter in Fiction.............................................222

Bibliography.............................................................................236
INTRODUCTION

“It isn’t going to be what we expected”:

The Surprising Use of Letters in Twentieth-Century Fiction

One may as well begin with Helen Schlegel’s letters to her sister Margaret in EM Forster’s Howards End: “Dearest Meg, It isn't going to be what we expected” (3). In her letter, Helen writes that the historic, bucolic house at Howards End appeared to be an unusual home for the capitalistic, urban Wilcox clan, but for readers of the novel, Forster’s choice to incorporate letters into the first chapter can be seen as equally unusual. Forster wrote the majority of Chapter I of his novel in a style that was influenced by eighteenth-century fiction. The epistolary novel was one of the most pervasive forms of fiction during the 1700s, but the end of the century saw a sharp decline in the number of epistolary novels being written, and in the nineteenth century, the genre had all but vanished. The epistolary form, however, continued to appear in prose fiction. Moments when the epistolary form is used in a work of prose that is not an epistolary novel can be called “included letters” or “interpolated” letters, and both terms
describe instances where the language of a character’s letter is directly quoted for the reader (Altman 195). Helen’s letters, then, are included letters, and as with many other manifestations of the form, the actual physical format of the text changes to reproduce the physical qualities of a letter.

In her letters, Helen talks about the events at Howards End in the first person, from her point of view. This makes her letters a moment of homodiegetic narration, also called character narration, which is when a character in the story also serves as a narrator. One of the effects of making this particular style of narration dominant in the first chapter of Howards End is that the authorial audience begins its journey into the novel seeing the world as viewed through Helen’s eyes and as constructed in her words, for, as Alan Duckworth notes in Howards End; EM Forster’s House of Fiction “We [as readers] are given almost immediate access to the expression of a vital personality” through the letters (29). The ability of the letter to refocus the fictional narrative on personal experience and character subjectivity was one of the main reasons letters were originally used in novels, as will be discussed in more detail later.

However, in Chapter II, Forster immediately switches back to the heterodiegetic narrator, a narrator who is not a character in the story, who spoke the first lines of the novel. This movement highlights how Forster could have employed other literary techniques to present Helen’s thoughts to the reader directly, instead of using the mediating form of the letter. During the early twentieth century, many modernist authors were experimenting with ways to present a character’s consciousness in their fiction, and one of the more common narrative techniques they used was “free indirect thought,” also called, “free indirect discourse,” which is when the narrator reports a character’s
thoughts, but uses at least some expressive markers associated with that character’s voice (Palmer 13). In the Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, H. Porter Abbott presents another definition of “free indirect style,” another name for free indirect thought: the technique is a “fluid adaptation of the narrator voice in a kind of ventriloquism of different voices all done completely without the usual signposts of punctuation and attribution” (71).1 Although used by such writers as Jane Austen and George Eliot, this narrative technique was employed by many writers in the early twentieth century in order to represent the subjective experiences and thoughts of characters and indirectly through the narrator, but “freely,” without superfluous punctuation and language, such as quotation marks and phrases like “he thought,” without introducing other forms in the text like a letter or a diary, or without an unnecessary narratee. There are several moments of free indirect thought in Howards End as Forster’s heterodiegetic narrator voices the thoughts and opinions of many of the main characters, but mostly those of Margaret Schlegel. If we think about the narrative techniques Forster employed in the majority of his text, his choice to open the novel with letters seems very curious. Forster begins his novel with the epistolary form, perhaps to expose readers to the thoughts of his character, but then in the next chapter, chooses to use a type of narration that could also represent the thoughts of his character, achieving a similar effect to the letter.

Helen’s last communication to her family from the Wilcox summer home is another reason that Forster’s decision to use the epistolary form at the beginning of Howards End is unusual. After Helen and Paul quickly call off their engagement, Helen

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1 Although there are several names for this type of narration, throughout this project, I will be using the term “free indirect thought.”
sends her sister a telegram announcing that their romance is over and begging her not to tell anyone. Helen’s telegram is representative of how the world of interpersonal communication was being transformed with the invention and use of new technologies at the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead of writing a letter, people could now send a telegram or call someone if they needed to contact another person. New forms of communication, like telegrams, were co-existing and continually interacting with older media, like letters. A term that describes this sort of system is “media ecology.” In Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology, Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wurtz present Niklas Luhmann’s definition of media ecology: “a reciprocity between media that ensures the continued presence of older, less advanced storage and communication technologies” (9). They also explain the effects a media ecology has on the different forms of media that exist within it: “an enlarged media environment leads . . . to ‘differentiation’—a definition of each medium’s alterity from other media” (9).

Thus in a media ecology, the introduction of a new form of communication, like telephone calls, will not necessarily replace another, like letter writing; rather, “differentiation” would provide people with a range of different options for sending a message, and the option a person chooses would affect the content, timeframes, and contexts surrounding the message itself. A good example of how the form of a message affects its delivery and reception is found in Stephen Kern’s book Culture of Time and Space, where Kern describes the major differences between letter writing and a telephone call. Because they are on paper, letters preserve events in the past, and since the mail carrier brings letters to the house at the same time every day, one can prepare oneself for their arrival (Kern 91). There are also significant gaps between the time when the events
narrated in a letter take place, the time when those events are recorded, and the time when
the letter itself is read (Altman 138). The telephone, however, can cut down on the time
between when events take place and when they are being told. Telephone calls are also
more unpredictable than letters. The telephone can ring unexpectedly, causing people to
stop what they are doing in order to answer, and unless a call is recorded, there is no way
to preserve the conversation (Kern 91-92). Despite the fact that letters were still the
dominant form of communication in the media ecology of the twentieth century, Forster
had different media to choose from if he wanted his character to send a message home.

Helen’s letters at the beginning of Howards End are an unexpected opening to the
novel, but her correspondence isn’t the only curious presence of the epistolary form in
twentieth-century literature. Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room has a similar opening
sequence—the very first sentence of the novel is a quotation from a letter Betty Flanders
writes. James Joyce’s seminal work, Ulysses, is also littered with letters. This
continuing presence of letters in twentieth-century fiction extends to novels written in the
late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as well, even when new technology such as
cell phones, email, and instant messaging are more popular forms of communication than
the letter. In Iris Murdoch’s The Black Prince, Bradley Pearson often makes short phone
calls to his friends, but invests much more of his time and energy writing letters to them.
In AS Byatt’s Possession, the letters from two Victorian poets impact the research
interests and relationships in a twentieth-century academic circle. Nine-year-old Oskar
Schell in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close writes to such
figures as Jane Goodall and Steven Hawking as he tries to retrace his father’s activities
on the last day of his life, September 11, 2001.
Several books have discussed the history of the post office in British and American society, but little is written on epistolarity itself. Janet Gurkin Altman’s *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* is still considered to be one of the foremost studies of epistolarity with its detailed categorization of the functions of letters in epistolary novels, including such topics as mediation, confidence and confidants, internal and external readers, epistolary discourse, and narrative elements like closure and plot. Altman’s book focuses mainly on eighteenth-century British and French novels, arguing that letters can be a specific and unique way to create meaning in works of literature and that understanding the form of letters is crucial to understanding the rise of the novel. Like Altman’s book, the majority of epistolary studies have discussed the relationship between letters and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Linda Kauffman’s book, *Special Delivery*, does examine the topic of epistolarity in the twentieth century, but focuses mainly on the intersections between noncanonical postmodern texts and epistolary novels, rather than attempting to chart changes in the use of the epistolary form in a historical context. In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Altman notes:

> Although there has been some research on the “included letter” in pre-eighteenth-century narrative, almost no one has investigated the reappearance of the letter in mixed forms in twentieth-century narrative…such a history would be particularly valuable if it compared modern uses of the form to earlier ones and situated the epistolary novel carefully within the context of mainstream novelistic production of various periods. (195-6)

My project hopes to fill this gap that Altman has described. Part of my effort in this dissertation will be to explain why letters are still being frequently used in British and American modern and postmodern fiction when the epistolary form could have been replaced by other literary techniques and when other forms of communication are
eclipsing the letter in the flesh and blood world. In order to understand why letters are being used, we first need to understand how letters are used in twentieth-century fiction. As Altman suggested, we need to understand the proper context of the letter in the novels of the twentieth century by comparing the functions of modern and postmodern letters to the original functions of the letter in fiction; examining the reasons that letters were first used will help us understand some of the reasons they are still being used today.

One of the reasons the epistolary form played a large role in the development of the novel in the eighteenth-century was that letters and letter writing were a pervasive communicative medium at the time; they were a necessary activity in order to continue traditional relationships in a changing society, and their influence stretched beyond just personal correspondence. Particularly in the middle classes, the move towards the suburbs and the newer style of Georgian housing with smaller rooms and more private spaces facilitated letter writing as a means of creating private relationships because individuals, especially women, became more isolated from the traditional communities they had participated in in the past (Watt 177-188). The penny post that was established in London in 1680 made it easy to maintain these relationships by frequent correspondence. Since letters were delivered from 8:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night, a letter sent could reach its destination in as little as an hour, and over one million letters were sent through the penny post in London in a year (Robinson 41-44).2 In addition, letter writing was part of the curriculum in schools, and letter-writing manuals taught individuals how to use correspondence to deal with tricky social situations. And, as well

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2 The Stamp Tax that taxed paper products (and infuriated the American colonies) was established in 1711 to capitalize on the prolific amount of written correspondence (Perry 65).
documented by John Richetti and Robert Adams Day, narratives composed of letters were one of the forms of prose that dominated the literary market during this time. Richardson himself was the author of a letter-writing manual, titled *Familiar Letters*, and one of the situations presented in this collection might have been the source of his first novel, *Pamela*. In one set of correspondence in *Familiar Letters*, the father of a virtuous servant girl writes his daughter, ordering her home because the master of the house is trying to seduce her (Turner 75).

In his classic study *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that Richardson’s *Pamela* is the first true novel. He posits that the use of the epistolary form in prose fiction gave literature “a subjective and inward direction,” which separated *Pamela* from other fiction of the time (Watt 176). Watt argues that we experience our daily lives not as an ordered sequence of events, but as a stream of consciousness, to use William James’ term, that is disorganized, random, and sometimes meaningless. Memoirs and biographies do not accurately depict how we experience life in the present moment, because they are written after the events we experience take place, allowing for reflection, interpretation, and the creation of a coherent narrative. Richardson’s use of the epistolary form in *Pamela*, however, decreases the time between when events take place and when they are recorded, as characters write about events just after they happen, sometimes while they’re happening, and without any knowledge of the future, a style of writing Richardson called “writing to the minute” (Watt 192). Because of the

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3 Collections of an individual’s letters were popular reading material; even Alexander Pope had his personal letters published for private reading, although such a move was considered to be indecent (Perry 71). Pope was the first major literary figure in England to have his letters published during his lifetime. Although he initially voluntarily published his correspondence, he soon regretted his decision and tried to understate the role he played in the publication of his letters (Perry 71).
characteristics of the epistolary form, a novel of letters can depict the internal states of characters accurately, or as Watt writes, “The nearest record of this consciousness is the private letter, and Richardson was fully aware of the advantages to be derived from [it]” (Watt 192).

As mentioned above, the relationship between the letter and the way characters are presented is perhaps the most important contribution of the epistolary form to fiction. Letters are traditionally understood to be a genuine depiction of what the writer is feeling; in her book, Correspondence and American Literature, Beth Hewitt notes the mode of letter writing “lies somewhere between voice and print . . . Like conversation, letters express our true sentiments; and like print, letters are permanent and leave a ‘lasting record’” (10). In fiction, then, the language of letter writing, or epistolary discourse, allows characters to record their own thoughts, feelings, or experiences and for readers of letters to be exposed to a character’s own words and voice. And because Richardson’s “writing to the minute” could “show the actual workings of the mind, its veerings and incoherences, the shape which thoughts take place before they are arranged for formal presentation,” epistolary discourse could also represent a character’s psychological state (Day 8). Ira Konigsberg articulates the importance of the epistolary form to character subjectivity in Narrative Technique in the English Novel: Defoe to Austen, when he says: “We can say that the letter form in general, allowing a free flowing, associational, and personal method of discourse, is a natural vehicle for creating characters internally” (89).

Using the letter to record character thought also had repercussions for the narrative in the text, and in order to fully explain the relationship between letters and narrative in this project, I will be analyzing narrative using the three-part model that
includes story, discourse, and storyworlds that Alan Palmer establishes in *Fictional Minds*. Palmer describes the story as “the content plane of the narrative, the what of a narrative, the narrated” (18). The second plane of narrative is the discourse, or according to Palmer, “the how of a narrative, the narrating” (18). The third plane of Palmer’s model is storyworlds, an approach to narrative theory that had its roots in analytical philosophy (Palmer 32).4 The term has its origins in the idea of possible worlds used in modal logic, the branch of logic that deals with “necessity” and “possibility,” and was adapted by narrative theorists and used to describe the world created in fictional texts (Palmer 33). Palmer defines storyworlds as “possible worlds that are constructed by language through a performative force that is granted by cultural convention” (33).5 In epistolary novels then, letters are the primary discourse of the story, and epistolary discourse is the language that constructs the possible world.6 Because so much of the story or the storyworld is dependent on a certain type of media, the epistolary novel contains several distinct relationships between documents and narrative, which causes the narrative element of the epistolary tradition to contain several subcategories. Each

4 There are several terms that describe this idea in narrative theory, such as “fictional worlds,” “narrative worlds,” and “text worlds,” but I will be using the term “storyworld” throughout my project (Palmer 33).
5 Other uses of the term “storyworld” emphasize not just the world created in the novel, but the world as created in the mind of the reader. In his book *Story Logic*, which synthesizes narrative theory, linguistics, and cognitive science, David Herman defines storyworlds as “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make a deictic shift—as they work to comprehend the narrative” (9).
6 In some epistolary novels, especially those with a singular plot line and limited number of correspondents, the epistolary form of the text actually works to blur the story / discourse distinction. Konigsberg argues: “We can go even further and say that the very form of the [epistolary] novel, letters written by characters, is so integrated in the plot, is such a part of the characters’ action and needs, that there is no separation of the world of the novel and the mode of narration, that what happens and the way it is told are inseparably entwined. There is no sense of story telling in the traditional way—the story is as much in the telling as in what is told” (80).
relationship between letters and narrative in the narrative element’s subcategories exists to different degrees, so in order to represent the full spectrum of these ideas, let’s think about these qualities as types of parameters.

The first parameter is impact. Reading, writing, and even the physical object of the letter can, but does not always, affect the sequence of events in the narrative. In Pamela, for example, Mr. B falls in love with Pamela precisely because he has read all the letters she has written during her ordeal. The second parameter is interpretation, meaning that the ability or the inability of a character to understand or read the information in letters has consequences for the narrative. Reliability, or the authenticity of the content of the letters is the third parameter; the veracity or mendacity of the information in character letters influences the events and the relationships between the characters in the novel. Mr. B’s falling in love with Pamela, to expand on my earlier example, is also dependent on him correctly understanding the narrative that Pamela had written in her letters and believing that narrative to be true.

The last parameter is coherence. In her book, Altman argues that the epistolary narrative is a naturally fragmented form, but that different formats can increase the unity or the disunity in the text. If the author of an epistolary novel wanted to make a more unified work, he or so could only incorporate one plot, present all the letters in the order they were written, employ only one set of correspondents, and de-emphasize the hiatus that exists between the writing, reading, and sending of letters (Altman 169). Another method of creating unity in an epistolary work is to have letters present multiple versions of a single event, which works to paint a more accurate picture of what happened. In Told in Letters, Day notes that this was one of the “advancements and improvements
which the epistolary method added to fictional technique” (7). If an author of an epistolary novel wants to preserve the fragmented nature of the form, she could construct several plots, not present letters in chronological order, and have several characters corresponding with one another (Altman 170). Thus the content of the letters determines the coherence of the storyworld in the epistolary novel.

The use of letters to present characters and their relationship with narrative also emphasizes the letter’s ability to give information directly to the implied reader. The very nature of a letter requires a reader or an audience. Hewitt argues that the content of letters are personal, private, and sometimes even secret, but when written down, those individual ideas are exposed to an audience, making them public (8). In epistolary fiction, this exposure takes place on two levels in the world of the novel. Thus one of the most important characteristics of letters in novels is that unlike most “real” letters, they are read simultaneously by two people, the character reader and the flesh and blood reader, or to use Janet Gurkin Altman’s phrases, “internal and external readers” (88). In his book, Narrative Technique in the English Novel, Ira Konigsberg extends Watt’s argument about private experience to the readers of novels. He contends that the major innovation of the novel was to expand the reader’s experience so that he/she can “perceive the fictional world as did the character, and hence brought him [her] closer to experience with the literary figure than ever before in fiction” (7). He also details the ways the use of the epistolary form in fiction affected the reading experience of the implied reader. Konigsberg argues that Richardson’s novels were able to change the implied reader’s sense of time in the novel; with the use of the “writing to the minute style” and the emphasis on the timely exchange of letters between characters, Richardson
was able to give the implied reader a sense that things were taking place on “a continuum of real time” which had not been present in earlier texts (88). The “writing to the minute” style, where the characters are unsure of the outcome of events, differed from the summaries present in other novel forms, like the memoir novel, dramatizing the events that took place and giving the implied reader a sense that she was seeing things the way they actually happened (88). Lastly Konigsberg posits, “Richardson developed the letter form’s inherent capacity for communicating information, for telling us what the correspondent saw and experienced” (89). Thus the letter is a way for characters to communicate with each other but a way for authors to communicate with implied readers as well.

Konigsberg’s statements add a new set of dynamics to the relationship between the implied author, the character reader, and the flesh and blood reader in the epistolary novel that can be explained with James Phelan’s rhetorical definitions of character narration. In *Living to Tell About It*, Phelan defines character narration as the narrative situation in which “an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator’s communication to a narratee” (1). Phelan’s approach to narrative supposes that moments of character narration take place on two different levels; there is communication between the narrator and the narratee, and communication between the narrator and the authorial audience (12). Thus the “telling function” of a character, moments when one character addresses another, can actually be broken down into two other functions. When the narrator speaks to a narratee, Phelan defines it as a “narrator function,” but when information is also indirectly reported to the authorial audience, Phelan describes it as a “disclosure function” of the telling of information (12). The relationship between the
disclosure function and the narrator function determines how much information the reader learns from a moment of character narration. Letters are the only way both characters and implied readers learn about events in an epistolary novel. In this situation, according to Phelan: “the narratee and the audience are in the same position with respect to the narrated. Both are fully dependent on the narrator for information.” This causes narrative function and the disclosure function of character narration overlap or, according to Phelan: “converge, or, we might say, the two tracks of communication exist one on top of another with no space in between” (13). Thus in the epistolary novel, the narrative function and the disclosure function often coincide, presenting information simultaneously to character readers and implied readers.

The presentation of a character’s internal states, the development of the narrative, and the presentation of information from the author indirectly to the implied reader would not be able to take place in the epistolary novel without the successful writing, sending, receiving, and reading of the physical object of the letter. One of the characteristics of the letter is its physicality; again, according to Hewitt, what distinguishes the letter from other forms of communication is that it is a physical record of thought. The physicality of the letter thus often plays a central role in the epistolary novel. As James Grantham Turner writes in “Richardson and His Circle” in The Columbia History of the British Novel: “Moreover the letter itself—the physical object and the unique perspective it embodies—plays an even greater part in the action” in the epistolary novel (77). To illustrate his argument, Turner discusses the powerful effects that letter as physical object in Pamela have on Pamela’s seducer, the notorious Mr. B. At one point in the novel,
when the letters are sewn inside Pamela’s skirt, they become a sexual symbol, but when Mr. B reads them later, they cause him to have an epiphany about his treatment of his dead mother’s servant girl (Turner 77).

Thus in the eighteenth century, Richardson’s “writing to the minute” technique established that when the epistolary form is used in fiction, written language can clearly represent a character’s subjective experience to the reader. This idea is manifested in the dominant ways letters were used in epistolary novels to affect the presentation of characters, the understanding of the narrative, the relationship with the implied reader, and the physical objects needed to communicate. Let’s call the ways letters were originally used in eighteenth-century epistolary novels, in regards to character, narrative, readers, and objects the epistolary tradition. Throughout this project, I will be using the four elements of the novel which were affected by the epistolary form in the eighteenth century as a lens to help me examine the ways that letters are used in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. This comparison will allow me to demonstrate how more current uses of the letter in fiction differ from its original intentions. As an initial test case, let’s use the elements of the epistolary tradition to help us understand some of the ways Helen’s letters are used in Howards End.

At first glance, it seems Helen’s letters demonstrate that written language can capture subjective experience, embodying the ideas behind the character element of the epistolary tradition. Helen’s letters to Margaret appear to be a physical record of her thoughts during her visit with the Wilcoxes. Alan Duckworth echoes this argument, even comparing Helen’s correspondence to those of Richardson’s heroines: “Like Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or Clarissa, Helen ‘writes to the moment’ in the present tense on a
specific day and from a specific place” (Duckworth 29). However there are a couple of sentences at the end of Helen’s last letter that call these earlier assessments into question. Helen writes: “I am going to wear [omission]. Last night Mrs. Wilcox wore an [omission], and Evie [omission]. So it isn't exactly a go-as-you-please place, and if you shut your eyes it still seems the wiggly hotel that we expected” (Forster, Howards End 4). It is not clear from the text if these omissions about eveningwear are Helen’s—if she deliberately left parts of her letter blank and didn’t know her own mind—, or if the omissions are the narrator’s as he acts as some sort of editor or censor of Helen’s letters.7 This letter from Helen, then, actually becomes a space for Forster to experiment with language and create textual ambiguities, because this letter highlights the ways in which written language fails to capture a person’s experience.

Helen’s letters to Margaret lay the foundation for some of the main narrative events in the rest of the novel, such as the relationship between Margaret and Ruth Wilcox, the marriage of Margaret and Henry, and the new life at Howards End that Margaret, Henry, Helen, and Helen’s baby will lead. Helen’s letters characterize the Wilcoxes as a wealthy family, because of her descriptions of their ancestral home, their trips to Europe, and their bullying of hotel staff. Despite their hay fever they also seem to enjoy spending a lot of time outdoors, playing games or going for a drive. They are also portrayed as being politically conservative, as Mr. Wilcox does not believe in female suffrage. The Schlegels on the other hand appear to be very philosophical, because Helen

7 Also supporting the idea that the narrator of Howards End has temporarily become an editor of the letters is the absence of Meg’s letter to Helen. At the end of her second letter, Helen acknowledges that Margaret has written to her when she says, “Thank you for your letter,” but this missive from Meg is left out of the correspondence (Forster, Howards End 5). These two omissions could be a parody of scholarly editions of letters, making Helen’s correspondence a precursor to postmodernist works of mock-scholarship, like Nabokov’s Pale Fire.
references some of her sister’s theories about life; liberal, because both sisters seem to support female suffrage; and well-read, because Helen discusses how she feels her ideas only originate from books and poetry. Almost all of Helen’s letters focus on the beauty of the grounds of Howards End; the house and the surrounding area seem to have captivated her attention in some special way. These letters immediately highlight the differences between Helen’s family and the Wilcoxes and portray Howards End as a beautiful retreat.

Like the narrative element of the epistolary tradition, Helen’s letters play a key role vis-à-vis the plot of the story, because the epistolary form is used to set up the main narrative conflict and illustrate the idea that written language impacts the reality of the world of the novel. However, these letters are also a red herring to the true plot of Howards End. The authorial audience of Howards End is exposed to Helen’s thoughts and might conclude that she is the main character of the novel, but although the majority of the first chapter is composed of Helen’s letters, it is Margaret Schlegel who is the main controlling consciousness of Howards End. Furthermore, Helen’s letters suggest that the focus of the novel will be Helen’s relationship with the Wilcoxes and her romance with Paul, whereas the novel actually focuses on Margaret’s relationship with the Wilcoxes and her romance with Henry, Helen’s relationship with the Basts, and her romance with Leonard.

In addition, including many of Helen’s letters in the first chapter of Howards End complicates the authorial audience’s initial understanding of the storyworld. At the beginning of the novel, the characters know information that the reader does not, so we have to read between the lines and pick up clues in the letters in order to figure out what
is going on. Helen’s letters talk about events that have taken place, but not in any chronological order. Although the letters do not say it directly, after reading them, one can conclude that Helen and Meg met the Wilcoxes in a hotel, probably while on vacation, made friends with them, and were invited down to Howards End for the weekend. Because their brother Tibby was sick, Meg was prevented from joining her sister. This reconstruction of events is accurate, because at the start of Chapter II, Margaret narrates them in this order to Aunt Juley after they have received the third letter from Helen. In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster writes, “The specialty of the novel is that the writer can talk about his characters as well as through them or can arrange for us to listen when they talk to themselves” (84). In the opening of *Howards End*, Forster does not talk about his characters, nor talk through them. He allows his external readers to overhear a conversation between characters, or more accurately, to read a letter over a character’s shoulder. General details and information about the situation are omitted because Helen is only addressing Meg and is not trying to relay information to an audience. We have to work hard to orient ourselves at the beginning of this novel to figure out what the “it” refers to in “It isn’t going to be what we expected” and how Helen got invited to the “it” (*Forster, Howards End* 3). Since Meg is familiar with the events, she is not told again how she and Helen met the Wilcoxes, why Helen and herself were invited to go down, and why she did not go down. In the reader element of the epistolary tradition, the disclosure function and the narrative function of a telling often function merge, allowing external readers and character readers to learn of events in letters simultaneously. In Helen’s letters, however, Helen’s communication to Margaret actually makes it difficult for the external reader to understand the events that take place.
Thus in these letters, the communication between the narrator and narratee, in this case Helen and Meg, is more important than the communication between Forster and the implied reader, making the narrative function of the letter stronger than the disclosure function.

Lastly, the writing, sending, and reading of the opening letters in Howards End are ultimately successful ventures because no missives are lost. However, there are moments of anxiety about exchanging messages, even in these first pages, that challenge some of the ideas about letters as physical objects from the eighteenth-century epistolary tradition. When Helen’s letter about her engagement to Paul reaches Wickham Place, after some discussion, the sister’s Aunt Juley immediately travels to Howards End in an attempt to try to talk her niece out of the marriage. Even with the advancements in technology, Aunt Juley is faster than modern communicative media. Right after she leaves, a telegram arrives for Margaret saying that the two lovers’ engagement has been broken, but it is too late to stop her aunt. The resulting encounter between Aunt Juley and Charles Wilcox puts the two families at odds until Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox develop their friendship.

Helen’s letters also contain a lot of descriptions of the countryside, and the beauty of the English landscape is a theme that runs throughout the novel. Alan Duckworth notes that “Forster seems to have attempted in Howards End, not to be the great poet who would give voice to a mythic England, but to be one of ‘the thousand little poets whose voices shall pass our common talk,’” and he cites one description of the countryside in Howards End to show the language of the novel connects Forster to the great English poets “Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, and Arnold” who “delighting in the English
flora and fauna and the procession of seasons, preceded Forster in ‘vivifying’ the English
countryside that they loved.” (128). Helen’s first letter from Howards End also ends
with a moving description of the countryside, and her letters from Germany pay a similar
attention to the landscape:

Helen loved the country, and her letter glowed with physical exercise and poetry. She spoke of the scenery, quiet, yet august; of the snow-clad fields, with their scampering herds of deer; of the river and its quaint entrance into the Baltic Sea; of the Oderberge, only three hundred feet high, from which one slid all too quickly back into the Pomeranian plains, and yet these Oderberge were real mountains, with pine-forests, streams, and views complete (Forster, Howards End 83).

In her writing of the countryside, Helen, like Forster, becomes one of the little poets of
England and is connected with the great names of English literature. So letters stand out
from the other forms of written language in Howards End because they are associated
with poetry and artistic creation.

Forster’s use of the epistolary form actually calls into question some of the basic
ideas about the relationship between letters and literature, interrogating eighteenth-
century ideas about the relationship between written language, subjectivity, and
experience. This is why modern and postmodern authors do not abandon the letter in
their novels despite developments in communication technology and literary techniques.
In this dissertation, I argue that twentieth-century writers deliberately use the epistolary
form in ways that problematize the epistolary tradition because they want their art to
challenge the ideas about written language subjectivity and experience that were
established by the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century. They also contribute to the
epistolary tradition by associating the letter with art and the artistic process. This in turn,
as I will discuss in the conclusion, causes the letter to become separated from its
counterpart in the real world; one of the main reasons letters were initially used in fiction was because they were a popular form of media of the time, but the letter in literature of the twentieth century is used in ways that correspond to developments in different literary movements, not in ways that mirror actual communication practices.

In Chapter 1, I examine how letters were used in the nineteenth century to show how the eighteenth-century epistolary tradition is initially successfully integrated into other fictional genres, but how the continued use of letters in fiction questions the ideas behind the tradition, eventually leading to moments where it collapses. These moments in nineteenth-century fiction where the epistolary tradition breaks down become the foundation for the modernist uses of letters in literature.

In Chapter 2, I argue that because of their epistemological concerns, modernist authors challenge the tenets of the character element of the epistolary tradition, by using letters to show that language cannot clearly represent subjectivity. To do this, modernist authors depict the process of composing letters and the problems inherent in trying to articulate one’s thoughts. These portrayals of the writing process create a connection between letters and art, which encourages early twentieth-century writers to experiment with the epistolary form and the elements of the epistolary tradition in their works.

Chapter 3 will be a case study that follows one particular modernist writer’s changing use of the epistolary form. In this chapter, I argue that the aesthetic goals of James Joyce’s early works parallel the original function of the letter in literature, which is using written language to represent the subjective experience of a single fictional character. After refining the technique of interior monologue in *Ulysses*, Joyce, like other modernist authors, uses the included letter as a space for formal experimentation,
focusing on first the character and then the reader elements of the epistolary tradition. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce uses the letter to comment on the relationship between language and experience and ultimately to question the impact language has on reality. Joyce also draws connections between the letter and art in his fiction, but he surpasses his contemporaries’ uses of the epistolary form by taking the relationship between letters and literature to a new level, directly identifying the letter with his own art in *Finnegans Wake*.

In Chapter 4, I argue that postmodern authors continue Joyce’s treatment of the epistolary form by investigating the ways language complicates representations of the subjective experience, rejecting the character element of the epistolary tradition. And like Joyce, postmodern authors explore the letter’s relationship to different states of being. Letters in postmodern texts fragment narratives and create new storyworlds, challenging the narrative element of the epistolary tradition, and focus more on the letter’s ability to communicate with external readers, questioning the reader element of the epistolary tradition. In addition, although the depictions of communication in these novels stress the difficulty of writing and the unsuccessful exchanging of messages, they also present the possibility that genuine communication does exist and can—temporarily at least—create connections between individuals.

In the conclusion, I claim that the use of the epistolary form in twentieth-century fiction reflects the major principles of the modern and postmodern literary movements, separating the letter from its real world counterpart. I argue that in the twentieth century, letters are used in literature not because they are prevalent in media ecology, but because their relationship with actual media is dissolving. In addition, my comparisons between
the functions of letters in the eighteenth century and the functions of letters in the
twentieth century demonstrate that using the letter in fiction automatically puts novels in
conversation with texts from previous literary eras. The letter’s protean nature and its
connection to the past make it a dynamic literary form that has contributed—and will
continue to contribute—to the evolution of fiction.
“Till this moment I never knew myself”: Letters in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

During the nineteenth century, letter writing moved from a “cult,” to use Ian Watt’s term, to commonplace (189). Several postal reforms and the resulting advancements in technology revolutionized the way people wrote and sent letters. The catalyst for England’s postal reform, Rowland Hill, left his mark on the history of the British Post Office by spearheading efforts to establish a nationwide penny post, popularizing the mailbox, and inventing the postage stamp. In his pamphlet, Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability, Hill argued that high charges were responsible for the lack of postal revenue, despite increases in the number of letters being mailed. In order to make up for this loss, he suggested that the Post Office implement a national postal rate of one penny and a system of prepayment which would decrease expenses and allow for a more effective pick up and delivery of the mail (Robinson 139). Stamps, or in his words, “a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash” would be used to indicate that a customer had already paid to send their letter, and with the abolishment of charging postage by the number of sheets,
envelopes would protect the content of letters from postal employees (Robinson 141).1 In addition, letterboxes, posted in towns or even outside of individual houses would make the delivery and pick up of letters more effective (Robinson 140). While Hill’s reforms took several years to be profitable, they immediately affected the number of letters sent within the British Empire. In 1839, the Post Office delivered 90 million letters, but one year later, after the establishment of the penny post in 1840, that number doubled, and in 1841 the number of letters sent increased to 200 million (Robinson 155). In 1875, 35 years after the penny post was established, Britons were sending one billion letters a year (Robinson 194).

Despite this surge in the number of letters being sent, received, and read during the nineteenth-century in England, the number of epistolary novels being written sharply decreased, and most critics agree that the form almost completely died out in the early years of the 1800s. Several factors seemed to contribute to the decrease of the literary form that had been so immensely popular in the previous century. In Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, Nicola Watson argues that sensibility of the epistolary novel became associated with the radical politics and violence of the French Revolution. She claims that the letter in nineteenth-century fiction was either exploited by liberal social critics to illustrate the plight of the individual or was subsumed into acceptable social conventions by conservatives to build a national identity. Mary Favert in Romantic Correspondence sees the letter in the 1790-1830s as a locus of political discourse, used especially by female writers, to disrupt the status quo. She argues that the rise of the

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1 The first postage stamp, or the “penny black,” featured a portrait of a young Queen Victoria and bore the words “Postage, One Penny.” (Robinson 150). Since England was the only country at the time to use postage stamps, the name of the country was omitted from the design, and to this very day, none of the stamps in Great Britain bear the name of the country issuing them (Robinson 150).
national Post Office made individuals question the ability of true interpersonal communication and made authors prone to discarding the form that had represented genuine correspondence and had become associated with political acts. Ira Konigsberg posits in *Narrative Technique in the English Novel* that the transition between different fictional genres was sparked by formal concerns and that the abandonment of the epistolary novel shows a breakthrough in authors’ abilities to represent a character’s consciousness. In *Told In Letters*, Robert Adams Day echoes Konigsberg’s argument about the limitations of the letter as a narrative technique and suggests another plausible reason the form might have been abandoned: the fabricated situations required for characters to be continually writing letters to one another “militated against realism” (202).

The abandonment of the epistolary novel did not necessarily mean the complete rejection of the epistolary form, however. In this chapter, I argue that when letters appeared in the fiction of the nineteenth century, they retained the characteristics that had made them crucial to the development of the novel a century before, especially in novels whose thematic concerns expanded on those of the eighteenth century. However, as letters continued to be included in different fictional genres, the use of the epistolary form began to evolve. Authors began to use letters in their fiction in ways that first questioned the ideas of the epistolary tradition, and then eventually broke with that tradition. This breakdown of the epistolary tradition in some nineteenth-century novels lays the foundation for the modernists’ use of letters in their writings.
“Will you do me the honor of reading that letter?”:

The Integration of the Epistolary Form: Pride and Prejudice and The Moonstone

Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and Wilkie Collins’ The Moonstone are two examples of how the epistolary form is integrated into other novel genres, preserving the main tenets of the epistolary tradition. Jane Austen is often regarded by literary historians as one of the first major canonical figures of the nineteenth century because she was influenced by the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, but she consciously moved away from the genre. Austen did publish an epistolary novel titled Lady Susan, and the original drafts of her first two major novels were probably written in the epistolary genre as well, but she considerably altered these texts in the final versions (Konigsberg 94).

Instead of using letters to expose a characters’ subjectivity, Austen worked on developing a heterodiegetic narrator who could report on characters’ thoughts. Her second published novel, Pride and Prejudice, is universally acknowledged as the novel where this narrative technique reaches its maturity. As Ira Konigsberg writes in Narrative Technique in the English Novel, Austen’s use of “a third-person narrative voice for creating in a sustained, convincing, and dramatic way the psychic dimension of a character” is “fully developed and constantly employed” in Pride and Prejudice (234).

Using what Alan Palmer calls the “speech category approach” in his book Fictional Minds, we can catalogue the different narrative techniques Austen uses to allow her heterodiegetic narrator to describe a character’s thoughts to the reader: “thought report” is when the narrator reports on a character’s thoughts using the narrator’s voice; “direct thought” is when a character’s thoughts are quoted to the reader; and “free indirect thought” is when the narrator reports a character’s thoughts, but uses a
character’s voice. Although the narrator reports on the thoughts of several characters, the focus of the novel is always on Elizabeth Bennet, and the majority of the time the narrator focalizes through her character. The term “focalization” originated with French narratologist Gérard Genette and describes moments when the narrator has the same perspective as a character (Rimmon-Kenan 72). H. Porter Abbott in The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative defines focalization as “The position or quality of consciousness through which we ‘see’ events in the narrative” (190). Unlike the more common term “point of view,” focalization separates seeing from speaking. A heterodiegetic narrator might focalize through a character, but describe what the character is seeing in his voice, not the character’s voice (Rimmon-Kenan 72). Thus Elizabeth’s subjective experience dominates the text and affects the reader’s understanding of the world of the novel as well.

Regardless of Austen’s development of these narrative techniques, Pride and Prejudice contains more letters than any of her other works, for as Deborah Knuth Klenck notes in “Fun and Speculation: Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice as Revisions,” Pride and Prejudice contains 44 letters, compared to only 21 in Sense and Sensibility (40). Because the original function of the letter in literature is similar to the new techniques Austen used to represent character thought, Austen could have replaced many of the letters in her novel with thought reporting by the heterodiegetic narrator. Instead in Pride and Prejudice, Austen upholds the ideas of the epistolary tradition while simultaneously integrating the epistolary form into another genre. The way she combines

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2 In Chapter 3 of his book, Palmer discusses why basing character thought on categories of speech is an inadequate approach to fictional minds and presents several different alternatives and additions to these categories.
the epistolary tradition from the previous era with newly dominant literary techniques is to use letters in her novel in a punctuated manner; Austen only includes letters in the text in selective situations that emphasize the limitations of the knowledge of her narrator, her main character, and thus her readers.

The letter that Lydia Bennet writes to Mrs. Forster after she has run away with Wickham is an example of this punctuated use of the epistolary form, especially in regards to the character element of the epistolary tradition. Austen presents many of the other characters’ thoughts to the reader beside Elizabeth’s, but rarely does the narrator comment on what Lydia is thinking. Her thoughts and emotions are concealed (or aren’t interesting enough to comment on) throughout the majority of the text, until it is necessary to explain why Lydia has left Brighton. When Lydia and Wickham are missing, Austen deliberately uses the epistolary form to reveal her internal state, as Richardson originally did with Pamela, so that her family can understand why she left and can work to salvage her reputation and theirs.

Jane shows this letter to Elizabeth after the Bennets have already learned of Lydia’s indiscretion:

My Dear Harriet,

You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise to-morrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater when I write to them and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke it will be! I

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3 In Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Darcy, Jane, Caroline Bingley, the Gardiners, Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet, and Lydia all are letter writers (Devine 100). Elizabeth is only shown writing one letter, and only a couple of sentences of it are included in the text at the end of Chapter 51.
can hardly write for laughing. Pray make my excuses to Pratt, for not keeping my engagement and dancing with him to night. Tell him I hope he will excuse me when he knows all, and tell him I will dance with him at the next ball we meet, with great pleasure. I shall send for my clothes when I get to Longbourn; but I wish you would tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown before they are packed up. Good bye. Give my love to Colonel Forster. I hope you will drink to our good journey.

Your affectionate friend,
Lydia Bennet (Austen 236)

In this situation where Lydia is absent, the epistolary form allows Austen to leave a record of her thoughts for her friends and family, upholding ideas about letters and characters from the epistolary tradition. Lydia’s description of herself as laughing as she is writing, presents a “writing to the minute” account of her thoughts and actions, in the style of Richardson. Most importantly, this letter, as Elizabeth concludes, reveals that Lydia did leave Brighton with Wickham under the assumption that they would be married and was ignorant of his seduction scheme. Until Elizabeth and the authorial audience are shown this letter, it is not completely clear to either reader why Lydia decided to leave Brighton; this record of her thoughts, however, provides some insight into what she was thinking, as misguided and selfish as it was. The letter also demonstrates that Lydia is oblivious to the ramifications her action has on her family. She thinks the whole situation is a joke.4 At this moment in the plot of the story, it is crucial for the main characters to discover why Lydia left Brighton if they are to find her and attempt to mend her reputation in society. If Lydia left with the intention of getting married, which she did, the Bennet family can still hope that she might be married when they find her or, at least, that they can persuade Wickham to marry her, neutralizing some

4 In “Letters and Their Role in Revealing Class and Personal Identity in Pride and Prejudice,” Jodi Devine posits that Lydia’s letters show she “lacks the proper education and etiquette for her to retain the distinction granted to a gentleman’s daughter” (104).
of the scandal that she has caused. This unexpected turn in the plot of Pride and Prejudice emphasizes Elizabeth’s unawareness of Lydia’s activities. Even though Elizabeth had seen Lydia and Wickham in several social situations, the whole Bennet family is unaware of the violence of her affections and is thus shocked and horrified to find out that she has possibly eloped. Only Kitty Bennet knew of Lydia’s love and she should have told her family about it. Lydia’s letters to Kitty contain private information that should be made public. As Jodi Devine argues in “Letters and Their Role in Revealing Class and Personal Identity in Pride and Prejudice,” in the nineteenth century it was very common to read an individual’s letters out loud to the whole family, regardless to whom they were addressed. Thus when Kitty keeps Lydia’s letters to herself at Lydia’s bidding, the two characters are not only jeopardizing their entire family, but are shown to be devoid of the proper social etiquette (Devine 104).5

This letter emphasizes Elizabeth’s and the rest of the Bennet family’s ignorance about Lydia’s feeling and her plans to become Mrs. Wickham. Simultaneously, the letter also highlights the limitations of the narrator’s vision and the choices she has made in whose thoughts to report. In addition, as the most sexual character in the novel, because of her flirtatious nature and her premarital sexual escapade with Wickham, Lydia’s association with the epistolary form connects her to the sentimental heroine of the epistolary novel, which Watson identifies in her book Revolution and the Form of the English Novel (89). Watson argues that “the fiction of sentimental seduction,” which usually takes the form of the epistolary novel, illustrates instances of transgressive female

5 Lydia violently underlines certain words in the letters she has previously written and it is not clear why. Jodi Devine speculates that underlying words might be evidence of some sort of personal agreement between the two sisters, that whatever is underlined is not to be read out loud, or it could have been a common technique for withholding information in the correspondence at the time (104).
sexuality that threatened the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century and became associated with the radical ideas of the French Revolution (2). Although Austen is working within a different literary tradition, Lydia’s letter continues to draw connections between desire, letter writing (even if only to female friends and relatives), and threats to established patriarchal order.

Lydia’s letter preserves ideas about letters and characters from the epistolary tradition and provides an explanation for a moment in the past, which was previously unknown, making the storyworld of the novel more coherent. But perhaps the best example in Pride and Prejudice of Austen’s use of letters is the letter that Mr. Darcy writes Elizabeth Bennet after his failed marriage proposal. This document, which is included in the text, presents Elizabeth with information she didn’t know and information that causes her to view past events in a new light. When Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, she rejects him for two main reasons. One is that George Wickham told her that Mr. Darcy denied him the living left to him by the senior Mr. Darcy, forcing him to go into the army, and the second is that she suspects, via a conversation from Colonel Fitzwilliam, that Mr. Darcy was instrumental in persuading his friend Mr. Bingley to leave Netherfield, breaking Elizabeth’s sister’s heart.

Thinking about Darcy’s letter in the context of the narrative, reader, and object elements of the epistolary tradition will show how the function of the epistolary form in Austen’s text is similar to the function of letters in the eighteenth century, despite the fact that Austen is only using letters selectively throughout her novel. Darcy’s narrative directly contradicts what Wickham told Elizabeth about his life, and initially Elizabeth does not want to believe what she has just read. But, Darcy urges her to apply to his
cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam to verify everything he has said: thus the information in his letter is depicted as being reliable. The letter provides new information about and alternative perspectives on the events and people that Elizabeth has used to understand the world around her. The story of Mr. Wickham and his relationships with the Darcy family was a complete surprise to Elizabeth, who had quickly believed Wickham’s tale of woe. Darcy’s alternative narrative about Wickham in the letter places both Darcy and Wickham in new light, and Elizabeth, after reflecting on Wickham’s and Darcy’s actions, eventually believes Darcy’s account of what happened and is convinced that Wickham has lied about his past. In regards to her sister, Elizabeth did not doubt that Jane had a preference for Bingley and was even proud that her sister’s affection “was not likely to be discovered by the world in general, since Jane united with great strength of feeling a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner, which would guard her from the suspicions of the impertinent” (Austen 21). But, after reading the letter, she begins to understand that this guarded behavior made her sister seem indifferent. She suspected that Darcy played a role in separating her sister and Bingley, but after reading the letter, learns the reasons behind his actions were very different from her suspicions. Reading Darcy’s opinions about her family is painful to Elizabeth, but she has always been aware of the possible consequences of their vulgar behavior.

Some of the information in Darcy’s letter is not new, for several other characters’ opinions were confirmed by Darcy’s narrative of events. What this information in the letter does do is force Elizabeth to see the importance of certain beliefs and actions that she had previously dismissed. Earlier in the text, Charlotte Lucas, to whom Elizabeth had commented on Jane’s behavior, cautions that Jane’s attitude could actually work
against her hopes of marriage and suggests that she should show more affection than she really feels. Elizabeth is quick to criticize this idea because she thinks that if she can perceive Jane’s affection, Bingley must surely be able to as well. Colonel Fitzwilliam was uneasy when Elizabeth began to speak to him about Georgiana Darcy the previous day, and the information in the letter reveals the reasons for his discomfort. He was afraid that his ward’s ill-fated engagement had been made public. At the Netherfield ball, both Jane and Caroline Bingley try to convince Elizabeth that Darcy was blameless in all of his dealings with Mr. Wickham, but she refuses to listen to either of their testimonies. Darcy’s letter is connected with the coherence parameter of the narrative element of the epistolary tradition because it emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives of one event, showing the limitation of one single subjective point of view. Reading the letter makes Elizabeth aware that her knowledge about the events she discussed with Darcy was extremely flawed by what later she sees as her own pride. The new perspective given to past events from the letter helps Elizabeth have a more complete understanding of the events in the novel, making the storyworld of Pride and Prejudice more coherent. In addition, the central role that Darcy’s letter plays in Pride and Prejudice suggests that an individual’s subjective experience needs to be balanced by other evidence. That is, a single perspective is limited, but multiple perspectives that substantiate each other led to a better understanding of yourself and others. One person’s internal experience needs to be bolstered by external information in order to understand what is true. As Ira Konigsberg notes: “Pride and Prejudice is a book about moral and social intelligence: the way we see ourselves in relation to others, and the way we see others in relation to one another and ourselves” (232).
Darcy’s letter is not only an important window on past events, but Elizabeth’s reading of it impacts both the narrative and her character. Elizabeth’s reading of the letter changes the direction of the narrative from Elizabeth hating Darcy to Elizabeth not hating Darcy, and thus is a major turning point in the story. Although she cannot easily forgive Darcy for the actions he took which hurt her sister, her opinion of both Wickham and Darcy undergo a radical change after she reads this letter. She becomes suspicious of Wickham, and her feelings towards Darcy become more charitable, which eventually causes her to fall in love with him. Secondly, reading the letter causes Elizabeth to have a revelation about her personality—after finishing it she thinks: “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (Austen 171). Elizabeth had always prided herself on her judgment, on her ability to discern a person’s character and to act prudently, but the information in this letter makes her realize that she had been blind and acted foolishly in regards to both Darcy and Wickham. Although a courtship novel, *Pride and Prejudice* has the characteristics of a *Bildungsroman* as well, because both of the main characters come to important realizations about themselves and their world before they can have a successful relationship. Konigsberg notes, “*Pride and Prejudice* is not merely a novel about two people who overcome external obstacles and marry; it is a book about two people who learn to understand themselves and hence learn to see and understand the world better, and who, because of this process of learning to change, are finally able to marry” (215). Being exposed to Darcy’s perspective on events and his personal history is Elizabeth’s first step in the process of learning to change.

Elizabeth is completely surprised when she reads Darcy’s letter because she did not know all of the information in it, especially the true details of Darcy’s relationship
with Wickham. Up until the moment when Elizabeth reads the letter, readers of the novel are also completely unaware of Wickham’s scandalous past. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth is a moment of character narration when one character tells something to another, but thinking about it according to James Phelan’s rhetorical approach to narrative supposes that this moment also includes communication between the narrator and the authorial audience (12).

One of the more distinctive features of the epistolary form in fiction as a moment of character narration is that it usually is not the dominant form of narration; that is, letters in novels are often only brief periods when a character narrates an event and are thus located within a more prominent narrative mode, such as noncharacter narration, or character narration by a completely different character. When a novel contains an included letter, readers can get information from either the character narrator of the letter or from another narrator. The way the different types of narration play off against each other determines how much information the reader learns from the letter.

In the case of the letters in Pride and Prejudice, the reader has the same perspective about the events in the letters that Elizabeth does because of the narrator’s frequent focalization through her character.6 Thus the information that the heterodiegetic

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6 Although the majority of the novel is focalized through Elizabeth and the narrator continuously reports on her thoughts, the narrator also sometimes reports on what other characters are thinking. One example of this is the presentation of Darcy’s thoughts in Chapters 7-12, when the Bennet sisters stay with the Bingleys. Each time Darcy’s thoughts are exhibited to the reader, they reveal that he is attracted to Jane’s independent sister. For example, after Elizabeth has refused to dance with him one evening, the narrator notes: “Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger” (Austen 46). Following a discussion the two had on character the next night, the narrator notes, “He began to feel the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention” (Austen 51). Lastly, before Elizabeth leaves to go back to Longbourn: “To Mr. Darcy it was welcome intelligence—Elizabeth had been at Netherfield long enough. She attracted him more than he liked—and Miss Bingley was uncivil to her, and more teasing than usual to himself. He wisely resolved to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should now escape him, nothing that
narrator presents to readers of the novel is almost always tempered by Elizabeth’s understanding of events. So what Elizabeth is not aware of, the reader is unaware of as well. In the case of Darcy’s letter, some of the information in it had been suggested on other occasions, but since readers’ knowledge is tainted by the narrator and limited by Elizabeth’s perspective, we probably did not realize the significance of these events, such as Charlotte’s warning to Elizabeth, when we read them for the first time. The implications of these comments escaped Elizabeth as well as us, and like her we need to go back and reread or reinterpret the events in the book to understand their full importance. Darcy’s letter in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, provides important information to both characters and flesh and blood readers. Darcy’s letter not only exposes Elizabeth’s and the narrator’s ignorance of events, but the reader’s ignorance as well, continuing the reader element of the epistolary tradition when readers’ only access to the world of the novel was through character letters.

If *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned with how one understands the world, and if one of the themes of the novel, shown in both Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s characters, is that truth comes from a balance of the internal and the external perspectives, then limiting the reader’s understanding of the storyworld and then gradually revealing information via letters are deliberate acts. Austen wants us to travel with Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy on their journey of self-discovery, so we need to experience things as they do. We need to read the letters at the same time, for ourselves, as the characters do. Including could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity; sensible that if such an idea had been suggested, his behaviour during the last day must have material weight in confirming or crushing it” (Austen 52). However to build suspense about Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship, the narrator stops reporting Darcy’s thoughts about Elizabeth, making his proposal to her a surprise.
letters in the text gives the authorial audience access to all of the sources the characters have, allowing us to change as the characters change. Devine notes in discussing Darcy’s letter that “the letter provides a lesson for readers of the novel, allowing them to locate themselves within the text and to reflect on and make adjustments to their own character and conduct along with Darcy and Elizabeth” (110). And Mary Favert notes similarly in Romantic Correspondence, “Austen . . . usually provides us with a good look at these [character] letters. Her narrative authority depends on our learning to see and read the letters properly” (137).

Darcy’s desire to write to Elizabeth and give her a letter is so strong that he violates social etiquette in writing to her. According to Elisabeth Lenckos, unmarried individuals of the opposite sex did not write to each other unless they were related or engaged (Lenckos). This timely delivery is representative of how messages, like the physical letters in the object element of the epistolary tradition, are successfully exchanged in Pride and Prejudice—with one notable exception. As Elizabeth and the Gardiners enjoy their trip to Derbyshire and develop their friendship with the Darcys, they are unaware about the situation with Lydia. There is a long time delay between when the events in Jane’s letter take place and when Elizabeth learns of these events, because the directions Jane wrote on the letter are illegible, thus it took extra time to reach its recipient. This delay, however, allows for Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s relationship to slowly blossom and ensures that Darcy hears of Lydia’s elopement; because he is now more comfortable in Elizabeth’s presence, he actually arrives to visit her just after she has read the letter and in her state of distress she tells him of her sister’s indiscretion. Austen
deliberately sends a message astray to develop the relationship between her main characters, and although Jane’s letter eventually comes, this misdirected missive betrays a moment of trepidation about the arrival of the mail.

In *The Moonstone*, Wilkie Collins uses letters in a similar way as Austen did over 50 years earlier. Collins’ letters in *The Moonstone* continue to embody the ideas of the epistolary tradition and are used in the text in a discriminating manner, even though they are only one type of written documents among many. The story of the Indian diamond’s violent acquisition, baffling theft, and eventual return to India is presented to the authorial audience through excerpts from family papers, personal accounts, letters, journals, and police statements and is told from the perspective of several main characters such as Gabriel Betteredge, Drusilla Clack, Mathew Bruff, Franklin Blake, Ezra Jennings, and Mr. Murthwaite. Each character narrator has a limited knowledge of the events that are taking place, but when the different narratives are combined they present the complete story of *The Moonstone*. But because one of the most important events in the novel revolves around a letter, i.e. the letter from Rosanna Spearman to Franklin Blake that reveals the identity of the thief of the Moonstone, the epistolary form is distinguished from other personal accounts. Because Collins deliberately makes Rosanna’s letter a crucial source of new information and an alternative accounts of events, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the themes of *The Moonstone* is that multiple perspectives and information from a variety of sources are necessary to understand the events in the world of the novel.

After personal accounts written by Gabriel Betteredge, the house servant of Lady Verinder, Miss Clack, a niece of Lady Verinder’s husband, and Mr. Bruff, the family’s
lawyer, Franklin Blake, nephew of Lady Verinder and editor of the text, takes over the writing to tell about the events he witnessed. Franklin has been traveling abroad, but once he returns home, he decides that he will continue the investigation of the Moonstone’s theft, in the hopes that the discovery of the diamond will lead to a reconciliation with his cousin Rachel Verinder. Upon arriving in Yorkshire, Franklin visits Frizinghall and reminiscences with Betteredge, who still cares for the now abandoned estate. Betteredge tells him that a letter has been waiting for him; Rosanna Spearman, one of the housemaids and a prime suspect in the robbery, has committed suicide and left behind an envelope addressed to him. When Blake breaks the seal, he finds a short note and instructions for retrieving something from the quicksand pit on the beach, known as the Shivering Sands. He retrieves the chest from the beach and inside finds a nightgown with paint on the hem. Rachel’s door had just been painted the day of the robbery, and the paint was still wet when the diamond was taken from her room. A smear appeared on the door the next day, so whoever took the diamond that night would have gotten paint on their clothes. Thus, when Blake finds the nightgown with paint on it, he knows that the owner of that nightgown stole the Moonstone. However, nothing prepares him for when he reads his own name on the nightgown and is forced to come to the conclusion that he is the thief. Completely astonished, he turns to Rosanna’s letter to see what answers it can provide.

7 In “Wilkie Collins’ Suicides: ‘Truth As It Is in Nature,’” Barbara Gates points out that Collins was one of the few Victorian writers who dared write about the taboo subject of suicide and often sympathized with his characters’ feelings of despair. However, she does not talk about Rosanna Spearman in her article.

8 Elisabeth Rose Gruner’s “Family Secrets and the Mysteries of The Moonstone” discusses the similarities between The Moonstone and the still unsolved Road murder case of 1860, where one of the key pieces of police evidence was a blood stained nightgown (242).
Like Lydia Bennet, the majority of Rosanna Spearman’s thoughts and feelings are concealed from the readers and the other characters in The Moonstone until her letter is discovered. The character narrators of the novel do not have access to Rosanna’s thoughts and cannot report on them, and throughout the investigation of the diamond’s theft in the “First Period,” Rosanna is extremely careful to keep her thoughts and motivations hidden until she expresses herself in her letter to Franklin Blake. Although it has an important function in the plot of the novel, Rosanna’s letter is also typical of the eighteenth-century idea that the epistolary form is a physical record of a person’s thoughts. Rosanna describes how her feelings grew for Blake, despite the difference in their stations in life and the grotesque nature of her appearance, and how she yearned for one look from him to stop her crying at night. Rosanna also confesses how jealous she was of Rachel Verinder, whom she assumed was the object of Franklin’s affections. Everyone knew that Rosanna had been a thief and had been in prison before she was a housemaid, but in her letter she discusses her struggles to try and be a reformed woman, but how she found it to be “a weary life” (Collins 315).

Not only does the beginning of the letter portray Rosanna’s thoughts, but the way it is written is meant to replicate her thought process—her letter is full of breaks, digressions, and fantasies. At one point in the letter, after describing her vision of her face in the mirror, she can’t finish writing her thoughts. It is as if they are too painful: “The glass told me—never mind what. I was too foolish to take the warning” (Collins 314). In a fit of jealousy against Rachel, she daydreams how her aristocratic competitor would look dressed as a servant. “If she had been really as pretty as you thought her, I might have borne it better. No; I believe I should have been more spiteful against her still.
Suppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress, and took her ornaments off—?" (Collins 314). Rosanna knows that censuring Rachel is not the reason she is writing the letter and apologizes for not staying on topic, hoping she did not offend her reader: “Try not to lose patience with me, sir. I will get on as fast as I can to the time which is sure to interest you—the time when the Diamond was lost” (Collins 314). The letter ends with the “writing to the minute” style which Richardson favored when Rosanna confesses she is crying as she is writing and is afraid she won’t be able to see well when she is done with the letter: “It’s time I left off. I am making myself cry. How am I to see my way to the hiding-place if I let these useless tears come and blind me” (Collins 328). Rosanna finishes her letter, looking into the future, hoping that she and Blake will be able to talk of these events one day:

Besides, why should I look at the gloomy side? Why not believe, while I can, that it will end well after all? I may find you in a good humour tonight—or, if not, I may succeed better to-morrow morning. I shan't improve my plain face by fretting—shall I? Who knows but I may have filled all these weary long pages of paper for nothing? They will go, for safety’s sake (never mind now for what other reason) into the hiding-place along with the nightgown. It has been hard, hard work writing my letter. Oh! if we only end in understanding each other, how I shall enjoy tearing it up! (Collins 328)\(^9\)

The way this letter is written reflects the character element of the epistolary tradition, and almost serves as a reminder of why the letter gave literature a more subjective direction. In “Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark: Collins and Disabled Women’s Sexuality,” Martha Stoddard Holmes writes: “The Moonstone puts Rosanna in a position to speak her own sufferings, and even to posthumously ‘frame’ in more ways

\(^9\) In “The Stories of The Moonstone,” John Reed notes that Rosanna’s letter “cannot look forward,” although this passage from the letter implies that Rosanna can imagine a future for herself (97).
than one, the man who has produced them” (71). What Stoddard Holmes’ argument overlooks is that Rosanna is able to “speak her own sufferings” precisely because her narrative is in the epistolary form, the form that was initially used to articulate a character’s thoughts and emotions in literature. Stoddard Holmes also argues that in *The Moonstone*, Rosanna Spearman “is the only clear voice of sexual passion permeating a courtship plot from which she is excluded” (70). Rosanna is another example of the connection between letter writing and transgressive sexuality that originated in the literature of the eighteenth century. Stoddard Holmes notes that Collins discarded Victorian beliefs about disabled women’s sexuality in his writings. She argues that “Collins radically replotted disabled women’s sexual and reproductive ‘place’ in at least three of his novels, transgressing not only the barrier of marriage but of childbearing” (61). Typically, disabled women in Victorian literature only experienced sexual passion, marriage, and childbirth if their disability had miraculously vanished (Stoddard Holmes 60). Thus the desire voiced in Rosanna’s letter rejects conventional ideas about disabled women and sexuality, continuing the link between female letter writing, sexuality, and challenges to patriarchal ideals.

Of all the character accounts that compose *The Moonstone*, Rosanna’s letter is the only document written during the time the events at Frizinghall were taking place, in 1848. The premise of the novel is that in 1850, Franklin Blake has asked certain individuals to recount the different events in the story that they personally witnessed in order to produce a clear and truthful record and to defend innocent people. Each main character, usually with the help of some sort of diary or journal, writes about events that took place two years ago, attempting to replicate their thoughts and knowledge of the
time, free from any present influences. Because the traditional use of the epistolary form allows characters to write about events right after they happened and in the midst of while they were happening, Collins deliberately used this form for Rosanna’s letter. Not only does it preserve her thoughts, but it presents a more immediate account of events. As in Pride and Prejudice, however, Rosanna’s record of her feelings during the present moment has a large impact on the novel’s future. As Stoddard Holmes writes, Rosanna Spearman “is the structural hinge to the novel’s mystery narrative” (69).

Rosanna’s letter is an important flashback to the past as it contains previously unknown information, confirmations of other character’s observations, and explanations for Rosanna’s mysterious behavior during the investigation of the robbery. In addition, it provides an important alternative perspective on events, which eventually changes the narrative direction of the novel. Several strains of Betteredge’s narrative confirm what Rosanna discloses in her letter. For example, Penelope had hinted to her father several times that Rosanna might be in love with Franklin Blake and Sergeant Cuff’s experiment in the garden confirms her suspicions. Knowing Rosanna to be in the garden, Sergeant Cuff accuses Blake of having some sort of interest in Rosanna—something he flat out denies. When Cuff immediately sees Rosanna quickly leave the garden with Penelope, he knows that he has exposed Rosanna’s feelings for the young man. The letter also reiterates that Rosanna lied about being sick to purchase and make a new nightgown, information that Cuff received from two of the other female servants at Frizinghall. The letter explains several of Rosanna’s actions as well, which helped make her one of the

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10 In “The Stories of The Moonstone” John Reed argues “Love is the engine that drives events toward a solution of the mystery in The Moonstone” (94).
prime suspects for the robbery. Because she had been imprisoned before, many of the characters in the novel suspected that Rosanna was either the thief or was collaborating with the mastermind behind the theft, and her unexplainable, erratic conduct only further incriminated her. All of the things that Rosanna did such as lying about being ill and staying up making a new nightgown were motivated by her love for Blake and her desire to help him successful steal the diamond. For example, in the “First Period” of the novel, Betteredge notices Rosanna Spearman leaving the library when she wasn’t supposed to be there. What causes him to remember the incident is that she had a look of “self-importance,” and that it appeared she was talking to Franklin Blake, although he didn’t mention anything about a conversation with Rosanna later (Collins 98). However, in a section of her letter, Rosanna spends a large portion of her narrative talking about her discussion with Blake while he was in the library writing. She concludes that her conversation has made an impression on him and it gives her hope that the two of them might be able to talk frankly about the theft. This first conversation is what drives her to talk to him several times before he leaves for London. All of the information in Rosanna’s letter, regardless of the characters’ or the reader’s previous knowledge, sheds light on past events, contributing to the coherence of the storyworld. It gives Rosanna’s explanations for her actions, confirms some of Sergeant’s Cuff’s ideas about the nightgown and why it hasn’t been found, and fingers Franklin Blake as the thief.

The Moonstone has been hailed by several literary critics, including TS Eliot, as the first detective novel in English literature, and the revelation that Franklin Blake stole

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11 Rosanna does not immediately come to the conclusion that Blake steals the diamond. She initially assumes that Blake had seduced Rachel, supporting psychoanalytic readings of the text that conflate the Moonstone with Rachel’s virginity (Hutter 184-5).
the Moonstone answers the classic question “Who did it,” which drives the plot of the entire narrative (Greiner 1). Rosanna’s letter, then, fills in a “hermeneutic gap” or “information gap,” in the text (Rimmon-Kenan 129). In Narrative Fiction, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies this lack of information in the narrative as one that is pivotal to the reading process of the mystery story (129).

Like Pride and Prejudice, the contents of the letter are not easily believed and the document seems unreliable at first. Betteredge, although sympathetic towards Rosanna, doesn’t think that the paint-smeared nightgown necessarily points to the guilty party and tells Blake not to worry about it. Mr. Bruff immediately discounts the information in Rosanna’s letter and suggests to Blake that Rosanna invented the whole letter, created a paint-smeared nightgown, and showed it to Rachel so she would suspect Blake of the crime and turn against him. Bruff says:

> Without alluding to the woman's career as a thief, I will merely remark that her letter proves her to have been an adept at deception, on her own showing; and I argue from that, that I am justified in suspecting her of not having told the whole truth. I won't start any theory, at present, as to what she may or may not have done. I will only say that, if Rachel has suspected you on the evidence of the nightgown only, the chances are ninety-nine to a hundred that Rosanna Spearman was the person who showed it to her. (Collins 333)

Rosanna’s first person account of her actions is not of itself considered sufficient evidence that Franklin Blake is guilty. But her story is later confirmed by Rachel Verinder in “The Fifth Narrative, Chapter 7.” Bruff and Blake conspire to set up a meeting between Blake and Rachel, so Franklin can ask Rachel if Rosanna framed him with the nightgown. During that meeting Franklin tries to talk to Rachel about Rosanna and the nightgown, but he is completely aghast to find that Rachel claims to have seen
him take the diamond with her own eyes. *The Moonstone* then, like in the epistolary novel of the previous century, shows the importance of multiple points of view. The information provided by a subjective account of events needs to be corroborated by other person’s accounts; Rosanna is not to be believed based on her experience alone—someone else’s experience, in this case Rachel’s, needs to confirm what she saw.

Again, similar to *Pride and Prejudice*, the information in Rosanna’s letter has a strong impact on the narrative of the text. Blake’s confrontation with the possibility that he is the thief of the Moonstone focuses the novel on a different question. Before Blake reads Rosanna’s letter, the main question the characters in the novel were trying to answer was “Who did it,” but after Blake reads the letter, the question now becomes, “How did it happen?” How could Franklin Blake have taken the diamond from Rachel’s room and not remembered stealing it? Up until Franklin Blake’s reading of Rosanna’s letter, none of the character narrators had suspected him of being the thief himself, since he can’t remember taking the stone. Naturally enough perhaps, he had never suspected himself of being guilty without his own knowledge, but this letter forces him to confront this possibility, however impossible it might seem. The shift to this second question takes place as soon as Blake reads the letter. As he leaves Frizinghall to go to London, Blake asks Betteredge if he was drunk on the night of Rachel’s birthday and if he ever sleepwalked. After Rachel accuses him of the crime, Blake ends up turning to Ezra Jennings, a doctor’s assistant, for an answer to the question. Jennings suggests that a combination of tobacco withdrawal, stress about the safety of the Moonstone, and a small dose of opium administrated to Blake unaware caused him to take the diamond without being conscious that he did. Blake and Jennings conduct an experiment to try to recreate
the exact conditions the night the diamond was stolen, and it is successful. Once again, Blake wanders into Rachel’s room and steals a replica stone. This not only clears his name, but convinces Rachel that he is innocent of the crime, paving the way for their reconciliation and their eventual marriage. Rosanna’s letter starts the chain of events that discloses how the Moonstone was taken. The juxtaposition of Rosanna’s letter and Jennings’ experiment suggest that The Moonstone, like Pride and Prejudice, ultimately calls for a balance between the objective and subjective. Rosanna’s letter is a subjective account of her actions and the events that took place after the Moonstone was stolen, and in order to discover what is true, her personal experience must be verified by an objective event like the scientific test that Jennings conducts with Franklin Blake. As AD Hutter argues about the novel, “Not only are the subjective and the rational called into question by the subjective and intuitive vision of the detective, but they are made to appear as two faces of the same coin” (176). Rosanna’s letter continues the narrative element of the epistolary tradition, as it presents letters as reliable narrative, uses them to make the storyworld more coherent, and allows the action of reading to impact the direction of the narrative.

As previously mentioned, The Moonstone is a classic mystery story, and as VS Pritchett writes in The Living Novel, with the publication of The Moonstone and Dickens’ The Mystery of Edwin Drood, “we begin the long career of murder for murder’s sake, murder which illustrates nothing and is there only to simulate our skill in detection and to distract us with mystery” (74). Despite Pritchett’s critical attitude toward the detective novel, his assessment of it illustrates the genre’s relationship with its authorial audience, categorized in the reader element of the epistolary tradition. The
mystery story is designed to “stimulate our skill in detection,” so as readers of this type of fiction, we are encouraged to read the evidence presented in the novel and to try to solve the mystery for ourselves. But in order to do so, our knowledge of the events in the novel must not exceed the characters’ knowledge, otherwise we would solve the mystery and stop reading. Thus our understanding of the storyworld must be limited, and we must learn about the information needed to solve the mystery at the same time as the characters, as in the reader element of the epistolary tradition.

Each moment of character narration in *The Moonstone*, including Rosanna’s letter, is a moment where Phelan’s telling function and disclosure function overlap. In order to keep the mystery from being solved prematurely, the narratee and the audience need to be dependent on the narrator for information, and the author of the novel needs to deliberately withhold information from the audience. Thus Betteredge, Miss Clack, and Franklin Blake need to write about the events that took place in 1848 as if they are ignorant of the outcome of those events. And when Franklin Blake writes about the revelation he has reading Rosanna’s letter, readers of the text also need to undergo the same revelation, so none of the information in Rosanna’s letter can be revealed to the audience ahead of time. Collins’ construction of *The Moonstone* mirrors the reader element of the epistolary tradition, where the information the reader learns about the world of the novel is based solely on information from documents written by characters.

Rosanna’s letter to Franklin Blake lies beneath the Shivering Sands for a year before it is read. But despite this long delay, her letter, like those in the object element of the epistolary tradition, eventually reaches its intended recipient. However, there is one curious situation in the story when letters fail to transmit their message. The “Second
Narrative of the Second Period” of the text is written by Miss Clack, Lady Verinder’s niece and a zealously devout, but hypocritical, Christian. After Lady Verinder confesses to Miss Clack that she is unwell and near death, Miss Clack devotes herself to saving her aunt’s soul before she passes away. So far Lady Verinder has yet to be converted; both the visits by Miss Clack’s friends and the myriad of Christian books she has left around the Lady’s house have not succeeded in leading her to the true faith. Clack says:

The next thing to try was—Preparation by Little Notes. In other words, the books themselves having been sent back, select extracts from the books, copied by different hands, and all addressed as letters to my aunt, were, some to be sent by post, and some to be distributed about the house on the plan I had adopted on the previous day. As letters they would excite no suspicion; as letters they would be opened—and, once opened, might be read. Some of them I wrote myself. “Dear aunt, may I ask your attention to a few lines?” &c. “Dear aunt, I was reading last night, and I chanced on the following passage,” &c. Other letters were written for me by my valued fellow-workers, the sisterhood at the Mothers'-Small-Clothes. “Dear madam, pardon the interest taken in you by a true, though humble, friend.” “Dear madam, may a serious person surprise you by saying a few cheering words?” Using these and other similar forms of courteous appeal, we reintroduced all my precious passages under a form which not even the doctor's watchful materialism could suspect. Before the shades of evening had closed around us, I had a dozen awakening letters for my aunt, instead of a dozen awakening books. Six I made immediate arrangements for sending through the post, and six I kept in my pocket for personal distribution in the house the next day. (Collins 231)

Miss Clack has faith that her letters and those from her friends will be read by her aunt because she will be off guard when she opens the envelopes, thinking they are just regular items in the mail. Clack’s last attempt at conversion, however, is as unsuccessful as her first two. After her aunt’s death, she realizes that not a single letter she left in the house or sent in the post had been opened. The messages that she so hopefully sent to Lady Verinder never reached her in time and were never read. The authors in the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries will pick up and expand on this theme, writing of messages that do not reach their destination and emphasizing the letter’s potential to be lost.

“Till this moment, I never knew myself”:

The Questioning of the Epistolary Tradition

Although written about different subjects and at different times in the nineteenth century, Pride and Prejudice and The Moonstone use the epistolary form in a similar manner. Both Austen’s and Collins’ use of letters uphold the major elements of the epistolary tradition of the eighteenth century, for in these two novels, letters are physical records of a character’s thoughts that expose a character’s internal state while she is absent. The action of reading a letter is a crucial moment in the narrative, because the information in the letter is reliable, sheds light on past events, makes the storyworld more coherent, and results in a turning point in the plot. Letters merge the narrator function and the disclosure function of a character narrator’s telling function, by having readers and characters learn about information at the same time, and despite a few delays and moments of anxiety, for the most part, letters are successfully sent and received in these novels. But despite their different subject matters—a courtship novel and a mystery novel—Pride and Prejudice and The Moonstone also have similar epistemological themes; both novels are interested in exploring the limitations of subjective knowledge and how those limits can be overcome by alternative personal perspectives and objective information.
Many other authors in the nineteenth century, however, concentrated their artistic efforts to probe more social and external themes. Realist writers, like Charles Dickens, explored how individuals were products of their social realities. His art privileged outside viewpoints because he believed external factors were the key to understanding people’s lives, and many of his early works, like his third novel Nicholas Nickleby, are told by a heterodiegetic omniscient narrator. “Omniscience” is defined by Rimmon-Kenan as “familiarity, in principle, with the characters’ inner most thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present, and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied . . . and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time (96). Nicholas Nickleby contains several letters, but because of the omniscient narrator, the information these letters provide to the narratee, Phelan’s narrator function, is more important than the information they provide to the flesh and blood reader, Phelan’s disclosure function. Ralph Nickleby’s letter to Arthur Gride in Chapter 51 of the novel is an example of how the reader element of the epistolary tradition changes with an omniscient narrator.

In Chapter 47, Arthur Gride and Ralph Nickleby conspire to persuade Walter Bray to marry his young beautiful daughter Madeline to the old, withered, spineless Gride. If the marriage takes place, Bray will be released of all his debts to Nickleby and Gride, Gride will have a young wife with a secret fortune he can sweep into his own

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12 In Susan Horton’s The Reader in Dickens World, she argues that the narrator in Dickens’ novels sometimes becomes another character in the text and occasionally keeps information from the reader, admitting “that he doesn’t know the whole truth” (45-47). However I do not think either of these situations occurs in Nicholas Nickleby. The narrator does not seem to exhibit any personality or agency that would make him a character and has an intensive knowledge of the events in the text. In "Melodrama and Parody: A Reading that Nicholas Nickleby Requires," Tore Rem agrees, noting that the narrator’s parodic voice in Nicholas Nickleby “demonstrates that he is able to see through appearances and expose false sentimentality, and this invites the reader’s confidence” (253).
finances, and Ralph will the money Bray owes him and a nice sum for helping set up the nuptials. Newman Noggs overhears the two usurers while they are scheming, but doesn’t hear the name of the young lady and thus doesn’t tell the plot to Nicholas. Meanwhile, Nicholas has fallen violently in love with Madeline Bray and has been recruited by the Cheeryble brothers to help her by pretending to buy some of her handmade goods. In the following chapter, Ralph and Grilde visit the old man several times—a series of events that is reported to the authorial audience by the noncharacter narrator and are thus not known to either Nicholas or Newman.

Ralph finally convinces Bray to force Madeline to marry Grilde and then sends Grilde a note, via Newman Noggs, announcing that the wedding would take place the following day.13 In his hurry to respond to Ralph’s missive, Grilde lets the letter fall to the floor, where it is quickly read by Newman Noggs. The authorial audience of the novel also reads the letter because it is included in the text. We are already aware of the plot against Madeline, although not completely aware that Ralph’s project, as the narrator calls it, should be finished tomorrow. When Newman meets up with Nicholas later that

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13 Newman Noggs is often transporting letters from character to character in the text, like he does here with Ralph Nickleby’s letter to Grilde. Newman’s access to messages allows him to take advantage of the dual private/public nature of the letter and expose personal information to a public audience, like he does in the above example. Two years later after Nicholas Nickleby was written, however, Newman’s job would have been obsolete. Rowland Hill’s postal reforms, which established a penny post in England, changed the nature of the mail by helping to create the mechanized nature of the National Post Office. Any communication between individuals now had to travel through an impersonal system. In “Going Postal: Mail and Mass Culture in Bleak House,” Christopher Keirstead describes Dickens’ distrust of the “distance that opens up between author and letter on posting” that was produced with the new mail system (93). Newman Noggs is the antithesis to the National Post Office’s Leviathan institution, because his personal interaction with the letters continually benefits Nicholas and his friends. Dickens, who seemed worried about the survival of the personal letter in Bleak House and who feared the violation of his private life with public letters, here in Nicholas Nickleby seems to condone Newman’s breach of etiquette when he habitually reads other people’s mail (Keirstead 92).
night, the name of the doomed lady is fresh in his mind, and he tells Nicholas the full
details of the scheme. Nicholas conspires to save his love and organizes her rescue the
next day.

The narrator function of this letter becomes dominant over the disclosure function
in this situation, because the audience already knows the bulk of Ralph and Gride’s plan,
even though the final details have not been revealed. In addition, because there are
actually three readers of the letter in this situation, the narrator function is at first
minimal, but then grows in importance. Gride knew that his wedding day was soon
approaching so the information in the letter was not a huge surprise, but Newman Noggs
learned a great deal from the letter on the floor and is able to draw more concrete
conclusions about the dastardly plans he overheard Ralph making from the letter. The
relationship between the narrator function and the disclosure function, which in the
reader element of the epistolary tradition overlaps, becomes more complex when a letter,
written by a character narrator, is included in a text with an omniscient narrator.

The letter that Ralph Nickleby sends to Gride is included in the text and contains
important information, and the majority of the epistolary tradition is built around this idea
that the content of letters is valuable and needs to be available both to characters and
external readers. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” however, the content of
the letter becomes irrelevant, directly challenging the ideas behind the character, narrator,
and reader element of the epistolary tradition. Poe’s story completely builds off the
object element of the epistolary tradition, because in “The Purloined Letter,” the subject
matter of the letter is irrelevant to the story, and the entire narrative is constructed around
a letter whose content is unknown. In the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Jacques
Lacan noted that the Anglo-French roots of the word “to purloin” suggest it can be also defined as “putting aside,” a term accurately describing how the letter moves from character to character (Lacan 43). During this transference, however, the letter itself undergoes changes; it is turned over, then torn, soiled, and turned inside out. The moments when the physical appearance of the letter is modified begin a sequence of events that ultimately result in its theft or displacement. Each time the letter’s appearance changes, the change is noticed, the letter is copied, and then stolen, resulting in a change in the narrative and a change in the relationships between the characters; thus the physical object of the letter is the driving force behind the narrative, instead of the information in it.

Unlike *The Moonstone*, “The Purloined Letter” is not a typical detective story, because all the parties involved know who the criminal is and the way the crime was committed. As David Van Leer notes in “The World of the Dupin Tales,” “In this ‘mystery’ there is never any doubt about what happened;” the question of “The Purloined Letter” then is not “Who did it?” but “Where is it?” (68). The story of the letter begins in the royal apartments and is narrated to Dupin and the anonymous character narrator by the Police Prefect G, who had heard the story first hand from the person the letter had been taken from, the Queen. Thus the structural format of the story is “two narrations within the narrator’s narration, with one of them, the Prefect’s


15 Although Poe never directly identifies the “personage of a most exalted station” and the “illustrious personage” in the story, in my discussion here I will refer to these two characters as the Queen and the King so that my terminology matches those of other critics (Poe 209).
containing the Queen’s narration” (Peraldi 336). The Queen receives a letter while she is
alone in the royal apartments.\textsuperscript{16} As she is reading it, the King enters the room. The
Queen wants to keep the letter concealed from the king at all costs, but is unable to hide
the letter by placing it in a drawer and is “forced to place it, open as it was, upon a table.
The address, however, was uppermost, and, the contents thus unexposed, the letter
escaped notice” (Poe 210).\textsuperscript{17} Thus by placing the content of the letter face down and the
address of the letter face up, the Queen is temporarily able to hide the letter, to alter its
appearance as to not draw any attention to it from the King. The Queen’s action has the
opposite effect of what she intended, however, because at this moment, the notorious
Minister D arrives in the royal apartments. He quickly catches sight of the letter,
recognizes the handwriting, sees the agitation of the Queen, and guesses her situation. As
he is talking to the monarchs, he constructs another letter, which looks similar to the one
the Queen is trying to hide and leaves it on the table next to her letter. Before he leaves,
he pretends to pick up his letter and deliberately picks up hers. The Queen is powerless
to stop him, knowing that if she does, she risks exposing her secret. Thus the attempt to
hide the letter prompted the theft of the letter. The main event in the introduction of the
story, the purloining of the letter, is caused by a modification of the physical format of
the letter, which results in the letter being noticed, copied, and stolen.

Out of desperation the Queen has divulged her situation to Prefect G in the hopes
that he will be able to retrieve the letter, and she has offered him an enormous reward.

\textsuperscript{16} Several critics have pointed out that the identity of the writer of the letter continues to remain as much of
a mystery as the letter’s content.
\textsuperscript{17} As mentioned earlier, envelopes for letters only became common in the latter half of the nineteenth-
century after a series of postal reforms, so addresses were often written on the opposite side of the body of
the letter. When it was ready for delivery, the letter would then be folded and sealed—its contents hidden
while it is sent to its recipient.
Prefect G and his men have spent several months searching every inch of the Minister D’s hotel room, but have not found what they are looking for, and he finally goes to Dupin to ask for advice.

Dupin believes that the first step in outwitting one’s rival is “identification of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent” (Poe 215). Thus, in order to get the letter back, Dupin needs to identify with his adversary. According to Liahana Klenman Babener in “The Shadow’s Shadow: The Motif of the Double in Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Dupin needs to be “reproducing the Minister’s own method of reasoning” (325). Dupin, trying to replicate the thoughts of D, postulates:

But the more I reflected upon the daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity of D—; upon the fact that the document must always have been at hand, if he intended to use it to good purpose; and upon the decisive evidence, obtained by the Prefect, that it was not hidden within the limits of that dignitary's ordinary search —the more satisfied I became that, to conceal this letter, the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all. (Poe 220)

So after identifying D’s methodology, Dupin decides to visit the hotel of the Minister and take a turn at searching for the Queen’s stolen document. He wears a special pair of glasses during his visit that allows him to survey the rooms of his adversary undetected. He discovers a shabby rack that contains a couple of business cards and one letter. The letter is described as being:

... much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle—as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had

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18 The bulk of “The Purloined Letter” is actually Dupin’s theories of deduction and psychology. As David Van Leer comments, “the very structure of the tales reinforce Poe’s concession that plot is of secondary importance in his depiction of the mysterious. The fractured chronology of all three narratives shifts attention from the evidence to the manner of its discovery and interpretation, and general philosophical discussions both frame the narratives and interrupt (at times overwhelm) Dupin’s explanation for the crimes” (67).
been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D— cipher very conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D—, the minister, himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, as it seemed, contumuously, into one of the upper divisions of the rack. (Poe 220)

After he sees this epistle, Dupin knows it is the one he is seeking; the letter is the only document in the room that is crumpled, torn, and soiled, for the rest of the minister’s documents are well preserved. Also the creases of edges of the letter are worn down, suggesting that the folds in the paper had been made more than once. In order to conceal the letter from the police, Minister D has changed the outside of the letter to look the exact opposite of its original appearance, which has allowed it to remain undetected, even though it is in plain sight.19 Again here, Dupin’s attention is drawn to the dirty letter because its appearance does not match up with his understanding of D’s psychology. As Joseph Kronick contends in “The Error of Reading and the Reading of Error,” “Finally the soiled appearance of the letter betrays the minister because he, we might say, no longer resembles himself, since his habits are methodical, not slovenly” (215).

The climax of the story, the return of the letter to the Prefect, is caused by a change in the physical appearance of the letter, which led to its detection.

In order to procure the letter from D, Dupin employs the same manner the Minister used to take the letter in the first place; he makes a replica of the missive, pays some people to create a diversion, and switches the two letters when the minister is not looking. As Babener argues “Nearly ever major movement of the plot occurs twice”

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19 Norman Holland doubts that the dirty letter would have remained unnoticed by the police: “I disbelieve that, in the Prefect’s incredibly expensive and time-consuming searching, someone would not have examined the letter on the card case” (308). In rereading this story, I have to agree.
(326). Dupin is rewarded, for Prefect G gives him 50,000 francs for the letter, and has the dual satisfaction of helping the Queen and getting revenge on Minister D, who betrayed him several years ago. Dupin writes a brief message in the copy of the letter he leaves in D’s apartment: “Un dessein si funeste, S’il n’est digne d'Atree, est digne de Thyeste” translated as “So grievous a plan, if not worthy of Atree, is dignified by Thyeste” (The Purloined Letter). The climax and the resolution of the story, then, are also caused by changes to the physical form of the letter. Minister D is able to hide the letter by radically altering its appearance, but the same excess of changes that concealed it from the Paris police is what immediately alerts Dupin to its presence, and in the end the Queen gets the letter back.

One major difference between the object element of the epistolary tradition and Poe’s letter is that Poe’s letter is moved from one physical place to another not in an effort to communicate, but in an effort to gain power over another person. Ross Chambers argues in “Narratorial Authority and ‘The Purloined Letter’”: “Possession of the letter is possession of (political) power—that is why the Minister steals it” (290). Since he has taken the letter, Minister D has been blackmailing the Queen, for according to the Prefect, “the power thus attained [from the letter] has, for some months past, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent” (Poe 210). Whoever

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20 Babener argues that the replication of D’s method by Dupin questions his moral integrity, writing: “it renders inapplicable the conventional moral separation between detective and culprit” (327).
21 This quotation along with Dupin’s extensive knowledge of D’s character is evidence that Babener uses to claim that Dupin and D might be brothers or even be the same person; i.e. that Dupin stole his own letter twice and was getting payments from the Queen and cash from the Prefect (331-2).
22 Freedman thinks that the letter in “The Purloined Letter” is a representation of Poe himself and that the letter achieves what no other entity in Poe’s fiction does—the return to the women: “What the melancholy student in ‘The Raven’ futilely longs for; what the bereft lover in ‘Annabel Lee’ secures only in pathetic fancy or necrophiliac reunion; what the narrator of ‘Ligeira’ retrieves only in the ghastly form of the risen dead, Poe-as-letter achieves at the end of ‘The Purloined Letter’: safe physical return to the lost and beloved woman” (121).
possesses the letter in this story has power over others. The minute Minister D seizes the letter he has the Queen in his power. However, when Dupin restores the letter to the Queen, she will have power over the minister. Dupin predicts that D’s career will soon self-destruct, because he will try to use the letter against the Queen, but his reputation will suffer when it is discovered that the letter is not in his possession and that no evidence of such a letter exists. But by returning the letter to the Queen, Dupin has more than political power over Minister D. He has shown that his power of deduction and abduction are superior to the minister’s.

As William Freedman writes of “The Purloined Letter,” “The letter, which begins as a personal expression of its writer’s perhaps passionate desire or intent and which threatens the well-being of its recipient, becomes an emptied counter in an analytic game of hide-and-seek between D—, the Prefect, and Dupin.” (115). This idea that letters can be emptied or devoid of personal content is manifested in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Even though several letters are included in Jane Eyre, none of them contain a depiction of a character’s internal state, like the character element of the epistolary tradition. In this novel, the rhetoric of the personal letter is no longer present in the epistolary form—it has already been replaced by other public discourses, namely finance and religion—but is exhibited in the language of the character narration in the last chapter of the text.

The letters in Jane Eyre from Mrs. Fairfax, John Eyre, and Mr. Briggs, John Eyre’s lawyer, all discuss financial matters instead of personal concerns and are written in the public language of finance. The character who is most associated with the

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23 Ross Chambers’ argues that “What’s at stake in ‘The Purloined Letter’ . . . is the gain or loss of narrative authority,” that the real power struggle in the text is who gets to tell the narrative of the letter (289).
epistolary form in *Jane Eyre* is St. John Rivers; not only does he receive the most letters, but he also writes the most, penning two included in the text addressed to Jane. Despite this affiliation with letters, traditionally an important form of personal communication, St. John is continually described by Jane as being incommunicative. For example, in her initial descriptions of St. John, Jane compares him to a Greek statue, noting “He did not speak to me one word, nor even direct to me one glance, till his sisters returned” (Brontë 339). Even when he talks to Jane, St. John frequently indirectly communicates with her using the language of the scriptures as a substitute for his own words and messages.

After Jane has revealed that she still has feelings for Mr. Rochester and refused to go to India with St. John, the clergyman reads the entire family a passage from the bible, *Revelations* 21. Jane can detect an underlying message in his choice of reading. She says, “The succeeding words thrilled me strangely as he spoke them: especially as I felt, by the slight, indescribable alteration in sound, that in uttering them, his eye had turned on me” (Brontë 401). St. John recites: “He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But,” was slowly, distinctly read, ‘the fearful, the unbelieving, &c., shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death’” (Brontë 407). After listening to this passage, Jane comments: “Henceforward, I knew what fate St. John feared for me” (Brontë 407). St. John uses this passage to communicate his fears about Jane’s place in heaven if she does not come to India with him. The “&c” in the passage, which is omitted from the text reads, “the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars” (*Bible, King James Version*). Jane has already admitted that she treated

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24 Sternlieb argues that St. John reads this passage to caution Jane against lying, like Brockleherst did when
Rochester like an idol during their courtship, and this passage expresses St. John’s fears that if Jane does not accompany him to India, she will reunite with Rochester, continue to worship her false God, and spend eternity in Hell.

Unlike Lydia Bennet’s or Rosanna Spearman’s letters, St. John’s letters do not discuss his thoughts or feelings; they only reiterate what he has said to Jane in the past and continue to use the language of the Bible to articulate his thoughts. After Jane hears Rochester’s voice in the night, the next morning St. John writes to her:

“You left me too suddenly last night. Had you stayed but a little longer, you would have laid your hand on the Christian's cross and the angel's crown. I shall expect your clear decision when I return this day fortnight. Meantime, watch and pray that you enter not into temptation: the spirit, I trust, is willing, but the flesh, I see, is weak. I shall pray for you hourly.—Yours, ST. JOHN (Brontë 410)

The letter merely repeats St. John’s demand for Jane to make a decision and continues to voice his fear of her spiritual well-being by quoting the scriptures, here relying on a passage—“the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” which appears in both Matthew 26.41 and Mark 14.38. The last letter from St. John, which ends *Jane Eyre*, again uses biblical passages to describe his emotional state. St. John, like Helen Burns, does not fear death, but rather rejoices in the prospect of the termination of his life on earth: “‘My Master,’ he says, ‘has forewarned me. Daily He announces more distinctly,—“Surely I come quickly!” and hourly I more eagerly respond,—“Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!”’” (Brontë 441).

*Jane Eyre* ends with an impersonal letter from St. John, but the language at the end of Chapter 37 and in Chapter 38 is similar to that of the epistolary form; the last chapters of the novel contain the rhetoric of the personal letter and allow Jane’s character to be a child (22).

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narration to create a relationship with the readers of her text, a relationship that letters in
the novel do not create. In *The Female Narrator in the British Novel*, Lisa Sternlieb
argues that “Jane engendered a profound . . . sense of intimacy with her reader” and
constructs the authorial audience of her narration as a confidante (18).25 Her use of the
term “confidante” connects *Jane Eyre* with the epistolary novels of the eighteenth
century, where, as Altman notes in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a form*, “confidentiality”
is a “visible characteristic of the letters that typically compose epistolary narratives . . .
which structures the thematics, character relations, and the narrative action of the novel to
a remarkable degree” (47). Jane does confide in her reader an incident that she does not
tell her husband, namely that she heard his voice crying out over the moor, which led her
back to him; Rochester tells his narrative of the summons, but Jane never reveals that she
too had a mystical experience on the same night (Sternlieb 35). At the beginning of
Chapter 38, Jane directly addresses the authorial audience by saying “Reader, I married
him,” and this invocation has the same characteristics as epistolary discourse (Brontë
437). In her book, Altman argues that the “particularity of the I-you” is one of the
defining characteristics of epistolary discourse, and notes that “Epistolary narrative is
thus distinguished from both memoir and diary narrative, where there is no reified
addresse, or from rhetorical works, where the addresse is anonymous and could be
anyone” (118). Jane’s “Reader” is not a specific individual, but is a more concrete figure
than what is addressed in a diary and more specific than an anonymous listener. Lastly,

25 Sternlieb argues that this sense of intimacy between the authorial audience and Jane as narrator is false
and that ultimately Jane’s narrative about her life is revenge against Rochester for his lies and betrayal.
Sternlieb’s chapter contains several points that should convince readers to be less accepting of the events
Jane narrates; however, I do not feel that the experience of reading the novel supports her argument that the
only reason Jane wrote her life story is revenge.
as Charmian Knight points out in “Reader, what next?—The final chapter of *Jane Eyre*”

the language in the last chapter of the text switches to the present tense—the tense that

Altman argues is the tense of the epistolary discourse (Knight 27; Altman 47). Jane writes:

> No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. (Brontë 439)

In *Jane Eyre*, the letter’s abilities to represent the psychological states of characters and to forge some sort of personal connection with others, which are embodied in the character and reader elements of the epistolary tradition, are transferred to the novel genre using character narration, but without using the epistolary form.²⁶ Here, the novel itself embodies the ideas in the epistolary tradition, connecting the letter and literature. This connection will be further developed in the twentieth century as many modern and postmodern authors draw parallels between the epistolary form and fiction writing.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, “The Purloined Letter,” and *Jane Eyre*, letters are used in ways that question the ideas behind the epistolary tradition. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, moments of character narration in letters are situations where the narrator function dominates the disclosure function. Because readers of the text receive all their information from an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator, letters in the novel are ways for characters to communicate, even though their original function in the eighteenth century novel was to provide readers and characters with information, combining the narrator

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²⁶ Many critics have commented on the parallels between *Pamela* and *Jane Eyre*. Jane remembers that Bessie told her about *Pamela* as a child, and both women marry their former seducers and write in secret (Sternlieb 27; Zare 210). However, as Sternlieb notes, Rochester never gets a hold of Jane’s manuscript, unlike Mr. B who steals Pamela’s letters (11).
function and the disclosure function of the character’s telling function. In “The Purloined Letter” key information about the letter, who wrote it and what it contains, is immaterial to the narrative of the story. Instead of being a personal communication from one character to another, in parallel with the way letters are used in the epistolary tradition, the letter is a key object in a political power struggle and its recovery becomes a lesson in deduction. Lastly, Jane Eyre interrogates the character element of the epistolary tradition, by using letters in the novel in impersonal ways and transferring the personal connection created between the letter writer and the letter reader to the main body of the text itself. “The Purloined Letter” and Jane Eyre question the idea that letters in fiction are records of a character’s internal state, since both texts focus on the letter as something impersonal and objective. The questioning of the idea that the letter is a window into a character’s subjective experience is taken to the extreme in two examples in Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility and Dickens’ Nicholas Nickleby. In these two works, the character element of the epistolary tradition is completely rejected, because the information in letters is false and letters are used to lie to others.

In Jane Austen’s first published novel, Sense and Sensibility, correspondence plays a large role in the relationship between Marianne Dashwood and John Willoughby. While they are in Barton Park, Marianne and Willoughby develop a passionate relationship, which Marianne tries to resume by secretly writing to her beloved when the Dashwood sisters arrive in London. Since individuals of the opposite sex did not write to each other unless they were related or engaged, the mere suggestion that the two have been secretly exchanging letters leads Elinor, Marianne’s sister, to believe that they are secretly planning to be married (Lenckos; Watson 88). However, after writing several
notes to Willoughby and getting no response, Marianne receives a letter from him apologizing for his actions, stating he is engaged, and returning Marianne’s letters and a lock of her hair. In Volume III, Willoughby unexpectedly appears at the Dashwood’s home and tries to explain to himself and his letter to Elinor. Willoughby did feel affectionately towards Marianne, but in order to support his lifestyle, he needs to marry rich and becomes engaged to another woman. Unfortunately, his fiancée, Sophia Grey, discovers Marianne’s letters and forces Willoughby to write Marianne a note, which she dictates to him, dissolving their relationship and lying about Willoughby’s actual feelings (Lenckos). Willoughby’s missive to Marianne directly challenges the character element of the epistolary tradition that maintains that letters are a genuine representation of a person’s thoughts. The letters from Mary Crawford to Fanny Price in Mansfield Park similarly contain false information and are used to manipulate others. As Lenckos argues in “[I]nventing elegant letters,’ or, why don’t Austen’s lovers write more often?” “Here, Austen’s novels clearly move away from the sentimentality of the epistolary credo, which revered letters exclusively as genuine writing from the heart and ignored the possibility of deceit” (Lenckos). Watson agrees with this assessment of the two novels, noting: “These letters far from representing authentic interiority in the way that they do . . . function instead as ominous harbingers and allies of scandal and rumor” (92).

Dickens’ works also question the idea that letters in fiction are authentic representations of a character’s internal state. In Nicholas Nickleby, for example, fake letters are produced in order to gain revenge on Nicholas and his family.27 After beating

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27 Fanny Squeers is another minor character whose letter is included in the text. Peter Ackroyd has deemed Fanny’s letter to Ralph Nickleby “the funniest letter written in the English language” (57). Fanny writes to Ralph to inform him of Nicholas’ attack on her father, her mother, and herself and his consequent flight
down the vile schoolmaster, Nicholas returned to London and took with him a boy named Smike who, because his parents were no longer paying for his tuition, had become a virtual slave of the Squeers family. Squeers is one of Ralph Nickleby’s cronies, and one Ralph’s designs for revenge on Nicholas is to take Smike back to Yorkshire and away from his new family. One night Ralph Nickleby and Mr. Squeers intrude on the Nickleby family’s peaceful evening. Ralph tells the assembly that his errand that night is to “restore a parent his child” and claims that a man named Snawley is Smike’s real father and wants to take the young lad home (Dickens 555). Ralph helps Snawley narrate his story about his son. He maintains that Snawley and his wife had a child together, but once they separated, the boy lived with his mother. Many years before, the wife wrote to Snawley, saying that the child had died. This woman herself died a few years ago and supposedly wrote Snawley a letter saying that the son was still alive and had been sent to Squeer’s school in Yorkshire. To validate these statements about Smike’s family, Ralph produces a pocket book filled with several certificates and the two letters written by the now deceased wife. Immediately suspicious, Nicholas demands to examine the documents with his friend John Browdie, but they cannot find anything wrong with the evidence Snawley has brought with him:

There was nothing about them which could be called in question. The certificates were regularly signed as extracts from the parish books, the first letter had a genuine appearance of having been written and preserved for some years, the handwriting of the second tallied with it exactly,

from Dotheboys Hall. She exaggerates her family’s injuries and accuses Nicholas of stealing a ring belonging to her mother. Later conversations reveal that Fanny’s accusations about the ring are false. Nicholas admits that he did find a ring in his belongings after he left Yorkshire, but that it got into his possession by accident and that he immediately returned it. The letter is also full of mistakes, showing that Fanny Squeers is not genteel, like Newman Noggs. Mistakes in letters will be a common feature in the letters of the twentieth century as well, particularly in Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts and James Joyce’s Ulysses.
Readers of the novel should be suspicious of Snawley’s claims, because he appears in Chapter 4 when he leaves his stepsons with Mr. Squeers so they can be taken to Dotheboys Hall, but his story seems to be validated by letters and certificates. The truth behind the letters is eventually revealed, however. Mr. Squeers gets cold feet about the project and suggests to Ralph Nickleby that he is afraid of having to testify in court and isn’t sure if he wants to take that risk. Ralph’s diatribe discloses the true nature of the letters: “What do you mean by risk? The certificates are all genuine, Snawley had another son, he has been married twice, his first wife is dead, none but her ghost could tell that she didn't write that letter, none but Snawley himself can tell that this is not his son, and that his son is food for worms!” (Dickens 697). It turns out that the letters, the bulk of the evidence that was used to force Smike into Snawley’s custody, are forged. Like Willoughby’s letter to Marianne, which expresses feelings that he never had and raises questions of authorship, this letter is completely contrived, was written by another individual besides the professed author, and used as false evidence for a malicious plot.

After she reads Darcy’s letter in Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet thinks: “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (Austen 171). Reading Darcy’s letter causes a change in Elizabeth and throughout the rest of the novel she tries to compensate for her earlier prejudice. The use of the epistolary form in literature undergoes a similar transformation in the nineteenth century. Initially it preserves ideas about letters and fiction from the eighteenth century, but as letters are included in different fictional genres and are used in literature in new ways, the ideas behind the epistolary tradition are
problematized, and eventually the form itself is used to refute the main premise on which it was founded; instead of proving that written language must record subjectivity, letters demonstrate how language can be used to present false experiences. These moments in nineteenth-century fiction that break with the character element of the epistolary tradition will become the foundation for early twentieth-century authors’ uses of the form. The modernists will continue to explore the ways language conceals interiority, and their depictions of the difficulties of composition will create a connection between letters and art that will inspire them to experiment with the epistolary form.
CHAPTER 2

“Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost”:

Modernism and The Epistolary Form

In Chapter VIII of Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room, the narrator breaks from her descriptions of Jacob’s actions and begins to talk about some of the implications of personal communication:

Let us consider letters—how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark—for to see one’s own envelope on another’s table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. Still, there are letters that merely say how dinner’s at seven; others ordering coal; making appointments. The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl. Ah, but when the post knocks and the letter comes always the miracle seems repeated—speech attempted. Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost.

Life would split asunder without them. “Come to tea, come to dinner, what’s the truth of the story? have you heard the news? life in the capital is gay; the Russian dancers....” These are our stays and props. These lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe. And yet, and yet ... when we go to dinner, when pressing finger–tips we hope to meet somewhere soon, a doubt insinuates itself; is this the way to spend our days? the rare, the limited, so soon dealt out to us—drinking tea? dining out? And the notes accumulate. And the telephones ring. And everywhere we go wires and tubes surround us to carry the voices that try to penetrate before the last card is dealt and the days are over. “Try to penetrate,” for as we lift the cup, shake the hand, express the hope, something whispers, Is this all? Can I never know, share, be certain? Am I doomed all my days to write letters, send voices, which fall upon the tea—
table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, while life dwindles, to come and dine? Yet letters are venerable; and the telephone valiant, for the journey is a lonely one, and if bound together by notes and telephones we went in company, perhaps—who knows?—we might talk by the way. (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 79-80)

This passage weaves together several distinct, and sometimes contradictory, arguments and observations about how communication impacts people’s lives. First of all, these paragraphs give a description of the media ecology in England during the early part of the twentieth century. Letters are the main focus of the narrators’ digression, but several references are made to the telephone and the role it plays in society, illustrating the changes in communication taking place at the time. In 1914, the Post Office was sending 3.5 billion letters a year, an average of 75 letters per person, which indicates that the mail was still the primary means of sending messages (Robinson 221). However, the popularity of the telephone was slowly increasing. In 1914, there were only 2,830 telephone exchanges, and in 1915 there were only 818,000 telephones in England, or 1.85 telephones per person (Robinson 221; Perry 82).¹ In England in 1920, there were 986,000 telephones, and in 1929 there were 4,500 telephone exchanges and over 25,000 public telephones alone (Perry 91; Robinson 246). Woolf’s narrator calls letters “venerable,” which implies that they deserve respect, but also that they are revered precisely because of their age. This adjective emphasizes that the letter is an older communicative media, and although still admired, is perhaps becoming antiquated.

¹ David Mercer’s book, The Telephone: The Life Story of a Technology, also emphasizes the small number of telephones in England in the early twentieth century. He estimates that in 1914 there were 1.7 telephones per 100 people in Britain, compared to 9.7 per 100 in the United States (67). For more about the slow acceptance of the telephone in England, see Charles R. Perry’s essay, “The British Experience 1876-1912: The Impact of the Telephone During the Years of Delay.”
In this passage, Woolf’s narrator also describes her desire to break through the surfaces of existence and explore a more private life: “‘Try to penetrate,’ for as we lift the cup, shake the hand, express the hope, something whispers, Is this all? Can I never know, share, be certain?” Woolf’s narrator is not only voicing her own desires, but articulating ideas behind a larger cultural shift. The early twentieth century saw a move from the objectivity of the previous era, and its focus on the external and the social, to subjectivity, and its focus on the individual and the internal. In his book Modernist Fiction, Randall Stevenson documents this change in perspective, arguing that many writers of the early twentieth century were choosing “to hold the mirror of art not to reflect nature and the world without, but to illumine the mind within, to portray consciousness itself” (17). In order to try to create this inner life, many modernist writers used the same techniques that Jane Austen used at the beginning of the nineteenth century, focalization and free indirect thought. These two techniques allowed authors to report on character thoughts and present the events in the storyworld from the characters’ perspectives. Like Austen, the modernists believed that individual subjectivity was limited, emphasized that one person’s vision is incomplete, and used the epistolary form in conjunction with a heterodiegetic narrator who reports character thought. But Austen used the letter as a form that embodies a character’s subjective experience in order to fill in the gaps created by the limited knowledge of her character and her narrator, eventually harmonizing the reality of the storyworld with the characters’ perspectives of that world. Modernist writers, by contrast, challenged the idea that the letter accurately embodies a character’s
subjective experience. Instead they use the letter as a space to explore the gaps between written language and subjectivity, emphasizing the difference between the reality of the storyworld and the characters’ understanding of it.

In this chapter, I will examine the letters in EM Forster’s *Howards End*, Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*, DH Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* Subjectivity is a central concern in modernist fiction, thus I will be focusing the majority of my discussion in this chapter on the character element of the epistolary tradition because it is based on the idea that epistolary discourse can record a character’s internal state. I argue that modernist authors use the epistolary form precisely to interrogate the character element of the epistolary tradition, ultimately questioning the original reasons for using letters in literature. Modernist authors challenge the idea that language can clearly represent the subjective experience by using letters in their fiction in three different ways: letters are divorced from subjectivity, becoming impersonal documents; letters deliberately exclude information, and even misrepresent certain events or experiences; and the process of letter writing is depicted as a problematic exercise. These last two challenges of the character element of the epistolary tradition lead modernist authors to view the letter as a *mise en abyme* of literary works, and this connection encourages them to experiment with the epistolary form. The narrator’s main point in the above passage from *Jacob’s Room* is that genuine communication no longer takes place between individuals in letters: “. . . if bound together by notes and telephones we went in company, perhaps—who knows?—
we might talk by the way.” The modernists’ use of the letter in fiction echoes this idea as they interrogate the original ideas behind the epistolary form and use letters in fiction in new ways.

“The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl”:

The Personal Document Becomes Impersonal

One of the comments the narrator of Jacob’s Room makes about letters is that sometimes, “The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl.” In this sentence, the letter seems to lose the personality of the writer, and in Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, William Faulkner’s, Absalom, Absalom!, and DH Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover, the epistolary form, traditionally a personal document, becomes impersonal, redefining its relationship to character subjectivity. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the exchanges between private and public media negate the value of the personal rhetoric of the letter, and in Absalom, Absalom!, the letter is regarded as an objective document. In Lady Chatterley’s Lover, the personal rhetoric of the letter is replaced with a more impersonal language—the language of the essay.

Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts is a story about a male advice columnist who dies at the hand of one of his readers. West’s novella opens with three included letters, which follow the character element of the epistolary tradition, because they are physical records of characters’ thoughts and tragic expressions of characters’ subjective experiences. However in this text, the interaction between private correspondence and public media devalues the personal rhetoric of the letter. Readers write down their most personal situations and thoughts only to have them answered with clichés; they expose
their subjective experiences only to be ridiculed by others and discuss their tragic
problems only to have them become a joke. Throughout the story, Miss Lonelyhearts
struggles to try to answer the letters he receives, but since he writes a newspaper column
instead of personal responses, he can never really help his readers.

In the first of the three letters that begin the text, a pregnant Catholic woman,
calling herself “Sick-of-it-all,” knows she is very ill and is afraid she might die when she
delivers her child; “Desperate,” a sixteen-year old girl wants a boyfriend, like most
people her age, but doesn’t have a nose and is contemplating suicide; and “Harold S” is
trying to deal with the knowledge that his mentally disabled older sister has been raped,
but does want to tell his mother for fear that “Gracie” will be beaten (West 1-3). There is
another letter from a reader later in the text that is similar to these first three. It’s from
“Broad Shoulders,” a woman who supported her husband while he was in the army.
After having left her abusive spouse four times, she has no money and is again thinking
of asking him back so he can help support her children.2

Many of us have an idea of what the “Miss Lonelyhearts” column should look
like because advice sections like it are familiar parts of newspapers. Some, like “Dear
Abby” or “Ann Landers,” are famous for their popularity and large circulations. Here is
a sample of an Ann Landers column:

2 These four letters are adaptations of real letters from an advice column in the early 1930s.
In West’s biography, Jay Martin notes that West actually altered the letters to make them more tragic
before he put them in Miss Lonelyhearts (187). Two letters that Shrike summarizes when he plays
“Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts” at a party are also probably based on real letters and are very
similar to the ones included fully in the novel. The first one he summarizes is from a seventy-year-old
woman who sells pencils to support herself. She has problems with her eyes and feet, and her son recently
passed away. The other letter is from a paralyzed boy who would like to play the violin. He has a toy
violin that he pretends to play and had his sister dictate the letter.
Dear Ann Landers:

I'm confused and hurt. My husband and I have been married for 25 years. Some years ago, a family moved close to us. The wife (I'll call her "Judy") did not work and began spending several hours a day "visiting" in my husband's workshop.

Judy's husband divorced her five years ago, and my husband gave her a job in our small business. Since then, my husband has insisted on taking Judy practically everywhere we go — eating out, Sunday drives, to church and so on. Any trip concerning the business means she must go "so she can learn." When Judy mentioned going shopping recently, my husband asked if she had enough money. He said, "You know, as a single mother, her salary doesn't go very far."

I realize the necessity of helping others, but I believe my husband has gone over the line. Whenever I try to tell him how I feel about this "friendship," he gets upset. Even the slightest criticism of Judy makes him angry.

Am I being unfair, as he claims? I love my husband dearly and hate to think of ending my marriage, but he acts as if he has two wives. I feel threatened and have developed an active dislike for Judy. What's worse, I don't feel that I can trust my judgment any longer. Please help me sort this out. — Confused in Kentucky

Dear Kentucky: There's nothing wrong with your judgment. You have every reason to resent your husband's closeness to Judy.

Stop playing the role of "wounded wife." Don't nag, threaten or kick him out. Be sweet and adorable to Judy. She won't know what to make of it. I predict that a complete change in tactics will throw them both for a loop and put you in the winner's circle. (Ann Landers)

Although the letter writer’s problem here is less severe than those in Miss Lonelyhearts, this example illustrates how an advice column works. People send in letters describing their problems, and the paper prints the responses from the advice columnist to the person who wrote in. However, the evidence in the text does not suggest that the Miss Lonelyhearts column functions this way. Miss Lonelyhearts’ entire column is never reproduced and shown to external readers; we see only bits and pieces of what he writes. Instead of answering individual letters, more often than not, Miss Lonelyhearts seems to write universal advice, quickly mentioning a couple of letters on the side. This is what he is writing to his readers as the novel opens: “Life is worth while, for it is full
of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar” (West 1). It’s not really clear, but the language of these lines does not seem like a personal address—it appears to be general advice. The next time Miss Lonelyhearts is shown writing his column, he is composing the same sort of rhetoric. Here the terms “us” and “readers” make it obvious that he is addressing many of his readers, instead of just one.

Life, for most of us, seems a terrible struggle of pain and heartbreak, without hope or joy. Oh, my dear readers, it only seems so. Every man, no matter how poor or humble, can teach himself to use his senses. See the cloud-flecked sky, the foam-decked sea. . . . Smell the sweet pine and heady privet. . . . Feel of velvet and of satin. . . . As the popular song goes, “The best things in life are free.” Life is . . . (West 26)

The letter from “Broad Shoulders” implies that sometimes Miss Lonelyhearts does talk about specific letters, but only briefly mentions them. “So Miss Lonelyhearts please put a few lines in your column when you refer to this letter so I will know you are helping me” (43). Peter Doyle’s letter also confirms this idea. He is prompted to write after reading Miss Lonelyhearts’ response to “Disillusioned.”

All the people that write into the Miss Lonelyhearts column, however, have very specific questions, want direct answers, and need a personal response. Sick-of-it-all: “I am in such pain I dont know what to do”; Desperate: “Ought I commit suicide?”; Harold S: “So please what would you do if the same hapened in your family”; Broad Shoulders: “Shall I take my husband back? How can I support my children?” (West 2; 3; 43). Unlike Ann Landers, for example, Miss Lonelyhearts does not appear to give direct
advice or try to answer any of these questions. In Correspondence and American Literature, Beth Hewitt argues that reciprocity is one of the main characteristics of the epistolary form. Sending a letter to another person creates an expectation of return, or as Hewitt writes, “Because letters make their address to audience explicit, they emphasize reciprocity: indeed the letter’s address works to make reciprocity all but ineluctable” (6).

Miss Lonelyhearts disregards the mutual exchange that takes place in personal correspondence, because he does not answer the letters directly and uses the public, general language of the newspaper as a response to his reader’s personal, epistolary pleas. The impersonal language of the newspaper is identified directly in the text as being against personal expression, because the employees of the newspaper have turned to this mechanized type of writing after they have abandoned their belief in the power of literature. Miss Lonelyhearts is the only person at the newspaper to take the letters seriously; everyone else, especially Shrike the features editor, mocks them incessantly. On the day of his death, Miss Lonelyhearts is dragged out of bed by Shrike and forced to go to a party so Shrike’s guests can play “Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts.” In this cruel game, Shrike encourages his guests to pretend they are Miss Lonelyhearts and answer the letters sent into the paper.

Miss Lonelyhearts’ failure to directly respond to the letters is one of the reasons he cannot impart a genuine message to his readers. Instead of writing individual responses to individual letters, as the etiquette of correspondence requires, he feels he needs to talk to the masses, which is why he looks to the language of Christ and of

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3 In “‘Inarticulate Expressions of Genuine Suffering?’: A Reply to the Correspondence in Miss Lonelyhearts,” John Keyes plays the role of an advice columnist. In a Dr. Phil-like manner, he identifies how the letter writers are complicit in their own misery and offers some simplistic solutions to their problems.
Christianity as the rhetoric that will redeem his readers, even though that is not the appropriate language to address them either. In his article, “‘Inarticulate Expressions of Genuine Suffering?’: A Reply to the Correspondence in Miss Lonelyhearts,” John Keyes points out how Miss Lonelyhearts wants Christ to be the answer to all the letter writers’ problems, although then “Christ [becomes] a maneuver to escape from the issues of the letters” (16). These letters are symptomatic of the way Miss Lonelyhearts fails to communicate to his readers and fails to see that he is an accomplice in Shrike’s joke and not a victim of it (Conroy 12). West’s novel, then, is a portrayal of one of the processes that cause personal letters to become impersonal documents.

Absalom, Absalom! is another of William Faulkner’s chronicles of fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. The novel explores our ability to understand the past, as Quentin Compson, his father, and his Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon, use eyewitness accounts, physical evidence, and guesswork to try to reconstruct the events that led to the downfall of Thomas Sutpen and his family during the Civil War. As David Krause notes in “Reading Bon’s Letter and Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!,” the novel is not an epistolary text, but it “does originate in two or three acts of reading letters, acts of trying to say what letters themselves do not, will not, or cannot say” (225). Discussions about letters in this text focus on the importance of the physical qualities of the letter, instead of its ability to record interiority, and the novel’s “overvoice” exists even in the documents included in the text, robbing them of their individuality (Ross 144).

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4 Krause does not want to “force Absalom into the epistolary genre,” but because letters are so central to the text, he argues thinking about it in the epistolary tradition produces productive readings (225). Both Krause’s “Reading Bon’s Letter and Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!” and “Re-reading Compson’s Letter and Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!” are concerned more with issues of reading and interpretation than with the epistolary form and letter writing.
After Quentin has met with Miss Rosa Coldfield, he and his father speculate about the history of the Sutpen family. The Compsons possess a piece of that history, because long ago Judith Sutpen gave Quentin’s grandmother a letter from her dead lover, Charles Bon. Before Mr. Compson gives Quentin Judith’s letter to read, he argues that letters do not preserve the subjectivity of their writers. He tells Quentin: “Or perhaps that’s it: they dont explain and we are not supposed to know . . . we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw” (Faulkner 80). In letters, living, breathing people become nothing more than words; their personalities and characters have completely vanished. The “affection,” or the state of change they lived through, is “incomprehensible” and is as foreign to readers as another, exotic language, implying that one will never be able to truly understand the past. In this discussion, Mr. Compson contends that letters lose their ability to capture the writer’s personality, transforming a physical record of a person’s thoughts into just a physical object, making the personal document impersonal.

As she gives her letter from her dead lover to Mrs. Compson, Judith tries to explain why she feels it is important for someone else to have something of hers that is so personal. Her explanation, as imagined by Mr. Compson, reiterates his ideas about letters.

. . . it’s all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn’t matter. And so maybe you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not
to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to the other, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that was once the reason that it can die someday . . . (Faulkner 101)

Like Mr. Compson, Judith does not value the content of letters from the past, but she does believe that the physical object of the letter, unlike a tombstone, can keep your memory alive once you’ve passed away. Your name, the dates of your life, and perhaps a bible quotation are written on your tombstone, but as time passes, people will forget your name and won’t be able to understand the other messages that you had inscribed on your own memorial. If, however, you could give someone something like a letter, people will remember you. It’s not important what the letter says, if people read it or even destroy it, but the act of giving it will be remembered. The letter as a physical object and the story of the giving of the letter will be handed down from one generation to another, and that will make a mark, keeping your name from disappearing into oblivion.

Although both Mr. Compson’s and Judith’s discussions value the physicality of the letter, preserving the ideas behind the object element of the epistolary tradition, they also divorce the epistolary form from personal rhetoric. This depiction of the letter as an impersonal document is also manifested in the included letters in the text, which are written by individual characters, but do not seem to contain individual character voices, breaking with the character element of the epistolary tradition. There is very little in the letters to distinguish one character’s voice from another or even from the narrator’s voice, very little to give characters a distinct style of thinking or writing. This blending of voices is one of the main characteristics of the entire text of Absalom, Absalom!. The
novel is composed of spoken monologues and conversations, moments of free indirect thought and interior monologue, and the narrator’s detailed descriptions of the past and present, but these separate voices sound almost identical and hard to tell apart. In “Oratory and the Dialogical in Absalom, Absalom!” Stephen M. Ross positions the discourse of the novel in the Southern oratory tradition and places it on the border of Bakhtin’s monologic, a single voice, and dialogic, several voices. He writes: “when we have a discourse such as stylization or character narration and when the differentiation between the stylizer and the stylized, or between the authorial and the character’s voices is blurred, then dialogical references are reduced so that the speakers merge into one voice” (81). In “The Evocation of Voice in Absalom, Absalom!” Ross shows how this tendency affects written documents in the novel:

The few documents that play a part in the story are subverted into the [narrative] Voice even as they function as solid symbols of recorded history. Bon’s letter to Judith is, as we have seen, a “voice,” a “dead tongue speaking” and indeed when we read the letter it sounds exactly like the narrative Voice with its rhetorical excess and absurdly long parentheses. Mr. Compson’s letter telling of Rosa’s death, “naturally sounds like father,” but Shreve in his turn sounds like “that letter” which “sounds like father.” The lawyer’s letter of introduction written to Henry Sutpen (as imagined by Shreve) possesses a pomposity typical of such epistles, but its style, too, echoes the Overvoice . . . (144)

The dominance of this monologic voice in Absalom, Absalom! means that Bon’s letter to Judith, along with the rest of the letters in the text, challenges the idea that the language of letters can realistically represent a character’s internal state.

Letters also lose their personal rhetoric in DH Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover, but in this novel the rhetoric of subjective experiences and personal thoughts is

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5 Ross is one of the few critics to mention the imagined letter from the lawyer to Henry Sutpen. John E. Bassett notes that Shreve adds an imaginary journal to the narrative, but does not mention that he adds a letter as well.
replaced by the scholarly language of the essay. After several steamy nights with Mellors, the gamekeeper, Lady Chatterley, or Connie, is on vacation in Venice, when she receives a letter from her husband, informing her about Mellors’ problems with his wife, Bertha Coutts. Mellors has never officially divorced this woman, who is portrayed in the novel as being possessive, sexually degenerate, and violent, and suddenly she has showed up at his house. He tries to send her off, but she will not leave his property, and Mellors goes to live with his mother. After finally dismissing the gamekeeper, Clifford writes to Connie, using a metaphor to introduce the subject:

The scandal of the keeper continues and gets bigger like a snowball. Mrs. Bolton keeps me informed. She reminds me of a fish which, though dumb, seems to be breathing silent gossip through its gills, while ever it lives. All goes through the sieve of her gills, and nothing surprises her. It is as if the events of other people's lives were the necessary oxygen of her own . . . I have been to the depths of the muddy lies of the Bertha Couttes of this world, and when, released from the current of gossip, I slowly rise to the surface again, I look at the daylight in wonder that it ever should be.

It seems to me absolutely true, that our world, which appears to us the surface of all things, is really the bottom of a deep ocean: all our trees are submarine growths, and we are weird, scaly-clad submarine fauna, feeding ourselves on offal like shrimps. Only occasionally the soul rises gasping through the fathomless fathoms under which we live, far up to the surface of the ether, where there is true air. I am convinced that the air we normally breathe is a kind of water, and men and women are a species of fish.6

But sometimes the soul does come up, shoots like a kittiwake into the light, with ecstasy, after having preyed on the submarine depths. It is our mortal destiny, I suppose, to prey upon the ghastly subaqueous life of our fellow-men, in the submarine jungle of mankind. But our immortal destiny is to escape, once we have swallowed our swimmy catch, up again into the bright ether, bursting out from the surface of Old Ocean into real light. Then one realizes one's eternal nature. (Lawrence 289)

6 Derek Britton notes: “the aquarium image was one [Lawrence] habitually used for places for which he felt the deepest repugnance” (234). For example, Lawrence said of Ireland: “Ireland is to my mind something like the bottom of an aquarium, with little people in crannies like prawns” (Britton 234).
In Clifford’s metaphor, the world is really the ocean and all people are a type of sea-life, like shrimp, that feast on the slime at the bottom. The fish-like creatures in this ocean need gossip and the misfortune of others to survive, although some people can, like a kittiwake (an Atlantic sea bird), rise above the water and breathe the true air. So to paraphrase, some people can revel in gossip, but some can take that information about others and use it to achieve to a higher frame of mind; when someone stirs up the debris and exposes their private affairs, you must look at it from a philosophical, not personal level. The switch of the metaphor from the fish to the bird is important because it signals who exactly Clifford thinks can make this escape. Earlier, when he and Connie were walking in the woods, he compared the lower classes to a different species of animal that cannot be understood. So the lower classes are the shrimp trapped in the bottom, but the upper classes, the kittiwakes, are the ones that can free themselves. Instead of directly trying to talk about his own experience, Clifford explains his impressions of the Mellors scandal indirectly using a metaphor, a figure of speech more common in literature and essays than in personal letters.

Another prominent letter in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is the one from Oliver Mellors to Connie at the end of the novel. After Connie has revealed to Clifford that her lover and the father of her child is the hated Mellors, not Duncan Forbes, Connie leaves Wragby, but she and Mellors decide to separate for a while. Mellors is going to try to work on a farm for six months to get a financial start, and then he hopes to reunite with
Connie after the baby is born in the spring. Although this letter is a confirmation that Mellors is devoted to Connie and her baby, the majority of the letter is written in the style of an essay instead of in the personal rhetoric of feelings and emotions.\(^7\)

Mellors is a gamekeeper, but his letters are written in a well-crafted prose that almost matches Clifford’s writing and which contrasts with his use of dialect in the rest of the novel. Mellors’ use of dialect in certain situations makes his character inaccessible to the characters in the text as well as to readers. In his article “Dialogue and Dialect in DH Lawrence,” Richard R. Leith argues, “such spellings [of dialect] immediately draw attention to themselves, making what the novelist has written seem strange, exotic, or quaint. This conditions our response to the character in the novel: it distracts us from listening to what he or she is saying” (246). In the letter, however, Mellors writes in polished prose, making him accessible to both Connie as well as to external readers of the text. The high rhetoric of the letter also reminds readers that, despite his background, occupation, and low and beastly sexual appetite, Mellors is different from members of his class—his character defies class categories.\(^8\)

The first section of Mellor’s letter describes his new life on the farm, but it quickly switches to a discussion of the lives of the miners that Mellors encounters in his

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\(^7\) The letter reaffirms Mellors’ commitment to Connie, but interestingly in “A Propos to Lady Chatterley’s Lover,” Lawrence seems to doubt if Connie will stay with him, even though it seemed to be her idea that they leave Tevershall and start a life together in the first place. Lawrence writes: “Even if it is a question if the woman [Connie] will really stand by him and his vital meaning” (358).

\(^8\) Lawrence rewrote Lady Chatterley’s Lover completely three times from 1926 to 1927 and one of the major changes in the novel was the character of the gamekeeper who was originally called Parkins in the first two drafts (Britton 3). In his article “Choosing between The Quick and The Dead: Three Versions of Lady Chatterley’s Lover” Philip Weinstein argues that the last version of Lady Chatterley’s Lover “establishes for the lovers a mythic geography, beyond class” (269). In addition, the character Parkins was clearly, as Connie notes in the first version, not a gentleman, while Mellors is “lordly” and has “escape[d] from his class origins” (Weinstein 275; 285) Even Connie’s sister Hilda (a Scot and an aristocrat) cannot help thinking with a bit of disdain, “He was no simple working man” (Lawrence 264).
new home, echoes of which are present in Lawrence’s Essay “A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover.” Mellors is extremely critical about the mining in England and is skeptical that the improvements that entrepreneurs, like Clifford, are trying to make will actually keep the industry alive. A lot of his discussion focuses on the lives of the miners and their wives and how they are ruining themselves with their lust for money. He articulates his vision of what the miners and their families’ lives could be like if they stopped worshiping Mammon, the god of money, and starting worshiping Pan, the god of spring and nature (Lawrence 326).

If the men wore scarlet trousers as I said, they wouldn't think so much of money: if they could dance and hop and skip, and sing and swagger and be handsome, they could do with very little cash. And amuse the women themselves, and be amused by the women. They ought to learn to be naked and handsome, and to sing in a mass and dance the old group dances, and carve the stools they sit on, and embroider their own emblems. Then they wouldn't need money. And that's the only way to solve the industrial problem: train the people to be able to live and live in handsomeness, without needing to spend. (Lawrence 326)

Mellors ends his letter to Connie by comparing their relationship to what he calls, “the little flame” (Lawrence 327). This flame becomes a symbol of Mellors and Connie’s love, and according to Mellors, it is what connects him to Connie even when they are separated. “And if you're in Scotland and I'm in the Midlands, and I can't put my arms round you, and wrap my legs round you, yet I've got something of you . . . We fucked a flame into being” (Lawrence 327-8). And later in the letter he writes, “We really trust in the little flame, and in the unnamed god that shields it from being blown out. There's so much of you here with me, really, that it's a pity you aren't all here” (Lawrence 328). The fact that the flame symbolizes the existence of their love even when they are apart shows that their relationship has moved to something beyond sex. Mellors’ letter to Connie,
then, contains a very different message from Clifford’s letter, but articulates ideas in the same literary form—the metaphor. Mellors uses snowdrops as well to try to explain to Connie, and to himself, why their current chastity is important. The chastity that he and Connie have to experience continues to connect them, as much as their sexual activity did earlier, but it is also a reminder that soon they will be able to spend time together and “fuck the little flame brilliant and yellow, brilliant” (Lawrence 328). The snow is a sign that the snowdrops will be blooming; likewise, their chastity is a reminder that soon their love will bloom again when they are together.

The quality of the writing, the analysis of the miners’ lives, the articulation of a utopian vision for them, and the use of metaphors makes Lawrence’s use of the epistolary form at the end of Lady Chatterley’s Lover more like an essay than a personal record of a character’s thoughts. Both Clifford and Mellors in Lady Chatterley’s Lover see letters not just as a space to share personal information, but a space to philosophize as well. Clifford’s final letter to Connie in Venice borders on an essay because much of the letter is spent vocalizing an argument. Like Clifford’s letter, Mellors’ letter to Connie is personal, but also philosophical; it is an essay where he can explain his ideas about life. Both documents are written not to express emotions, in the convention of the epistolary tradition, but to express philosophies of the world.

In these three texts we see the process by which the character element of the epistolary tradition is interrogated as the letter, traditionally a personal document, becomes an impersonal one. In Miss Lonelyhearts, answering private letters with the public newspaper column devalues the personal rhetoric of the letter. In Absalom, Absalom!, the physicality of the letter and its ability to preserve the past is viewed as
more important than the letter’s ability to record one’s thoughts. Finally in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, letters contain a language different from the epistolary discourse, because the language of the majority of both Clifford’s and Mellors’ letters is closer to the essay than the personal rhetoric of the letter. In Jane Eyre, the personal rhetoric of the letter was replaced by the rhetoric of business, finance, and religion, but at the end of the text, the language of the character narrator adopted the personal rhetoric traditionally associated with the letter. In these three novels, however, the personal rhetoric of the letter is not embodied in any other forms in the text and appears to be completely lost.

“Letter writing is practiced mendaciously nowadays”: Letters and Lying

The previous examples of letters in Miss Lonelyhearts, Absalom, Absalom!, and Lady Chatterley’s Lover all foreground the questioning of the character element of the epistolary tradition. Other letters in modernist texts, however, completely reject the idea that a letter is an authentic representation of a character’s subjectivity, because the experiences characters record in letters are different from what they actually experienced in the novel’s storyworld. As the narrator of Jacob’s Room wryly puts it “But that letter writing is practiced mendaciously nowadays . . . seems likely enough” (Woolf 109). One of the ways the experiences presented in letters are contrasted with the experiences of the character’s reality is when descriptions of events in the novel, provided by the heterodiegetic narrator, emphasize that characters have deliberately left out certain information in their letters. Howards End and Jacob’s Room are two texts where the narrator’s observations of the characters contrast with what they have written in their correspondence.
In *Howards End*, after Evie’s wedding and the dreadful confrontation between Henry and the Basts, Helen has inexplicably left England and avoided any direct contact with Margaret or Tibby. She even refuses to come see her Aunt Juley, once she has learned the older woman has recovered from her illness. Compared to what she has written in the past, the last letter Helen writes to Margaret is marked as prime evidence by both the narrator and her family that something is seriously wrong with her. The narrator introduces the letter with “It was a disquieting letter, though the opening was affectionate and sane” (Forster 220).

*Dearest Meg,*

*Give Helen’s love to Aunt Juley. Tell her that I love, and have loved her ever since I can remember. I shall be in London Thursday. My address will be care of the bankers. I have not yet settled on a hotel, so write or wire to me there and give me detailed news. If Aunt Juley is much better, or if, for a terrible reason, it would be no good my coming down to Swanage, you must not think it odd if I do not come. I have all sorts of plans in my head. I am living abroad at present, and want to get back as quickly as possible. Will you please tell me where our furniture is? I should like to take out one or two books; the rest are for you.*

*Forgive me, dearest Meg. This must read like rather a tiresome letter, but all letters are from your loving*

*Helen* (Forster 220)

This is a far cry from Helen’s previous letters that are full of emotions, physical descriptions, humor, and philosophy, which she wrote to Margaret while at Howards End and in Germany. This letter rejects all familial ties, is vague, and is mainly written to get information. The uncharacteristic tone and language of the letter are what force Margaret to confide in Henry and eventually set up two of the climaxes of the novel—Leonard’s
death and Charles’ imprisonment. Margaret assumes by Helen’s language that she is mentally ill, when in reality Helen is hiding from her family because she is pregnant, information that her missive to Margaret deliberately leaves out.  

The very opening sentence of the letter, “Give Helen's love to Aunt Juley,” where Helen talks about herself in the third person, has the affect of impersonalising the message inside, completely separating Helen’s character from what she wrote. The letter avoids the issue of Helen’s pregnancy and only talks about her future in vague terms like “have all sorts of plans in my head,” increasing the gap between the epistolary discourse and Helen’s subjective experience. Helen’s letter is not an accurate portrayal of her internal state, because she just leaves out selected—but crucial—information about her current life. As in Pride and Prejudice, Helen’s letter and the subsequent discovery about her pregnancy emphasize the limits of Margaret’s knowledge about her sister; Margaret thought Helen was ill, when in reality she has become a social outcast. Helen’s letter also illustrates the limitations of the heterodiegetic narrator’s knowledge about Helen; since the narrator of Howards End focalizes the majority of the novel through Margaret, he himself seems a bit surprised when a very pregnant Helen shows up at the Wilcox family

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9 Several critics have argued that the contradictory relationship between letters and truth in Howards End is part of a more universal move away from language in the novel. Using a phrase from Howards End to support her claims, Mary Gordon writes, “‘Things that can’t be phrased’ are an important element of this novel, an ironic counterpart to the part of it that honors the rational, the honorable, and the clear” (101). Other critics have taken a more radical stance on this issue. In her essay “Gesturing toward an Open Space: Gender, Form, and Language in Howards End,” Elizabeth Langland notes that “As Margaret moves towards insight and vision, she, too, moves away from language” (413). Douglass H. Thomson in “From Words to Things: Margaret’s Progress in Howards End” argues that “at the heart of Forster’s quest for order in Howards End is a disturbing suggestion of the artificiality often inherent in acts to impose order—and nowhere is the novel’s skepticism more self-conscious than in its treatment of language. Despite the attempt to synthesize, we find that prose often chokes passion, and, at other times, that passion can unsettle the prose” (122). Thomson argues in the beginning of his paper that the “moments of epistolary confusion” in the novel question Forster’s use of language as a way to achieve personal relations (122).
home to collect her books. What separates Forster’s use of the letter from Austen’s, is that in *Pride and Prejudice* the letter is the missing piece of the puzzle, providing important information to the characters and reader. In *Howards End*, the letter only adds to the mystery of Helen’s absence.

Letters in Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* also fail to adequately represent the world of the novel. In letters in *Jacob’s Room*, people do not say what they really mean and, like Helen Schlegel, deliberately leave out information, preventing the epistolary form from presenting a clear view of a character’s subjective experience. The very first letter at the beginning of the book is an example of this. “‘So of course,’ wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper into the sand, ‘there was nothing for it but to leave’” (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 3). Betty Flanders’ sentence in her letter seems very businesslike and emotionless. However, she is crying as she writes, and the narrator describes the tears blurring her vision:

. . . tears slowly filled [her eyes]. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor’s little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread. (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 3)

The line “Accidents were awful things” hints at why Betty is upset—the vision of the bending mast probably reminds her of an past accident that took place at sea—but in the

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*Jacob’s Room*, Woolf’s third novel, tells the life story of a young man named Jacob Flanders. The character of Jacob was based on Woolf’s brother Thoby Stephens who died in World War I, but is also meant to represent all young men who were killed in battle (Bazin and Lauter 15). The region of Flanders in Belgium saw some of the heaviest fatalities during the early years of World War I, and during the early twentieth century, the word became synonymous with loss of life in war (Bazin and Lauter 15). Although Jacob was based on Thoby there were several differences between their lives. It is assumed Jacob dies in battle, but Thoby dies of typhoid that he caught while fighting in Greece. In “Virginia Woolf’s Keen Sensitivity to War: Its Roots and Impact on Her Novels,” Bazin and Lauter argue “Jacob’s Room is the first novel in which [Woolf] makes a close identification between her grief and that of the families and friends of those killed in the war” (15).
section of her letter quoted above, Betty does not explain the accident nor make any reference to the powerful emotions she is feeling.\textsuperscript{11} Later in the novel, she is also very circumspect about what she writes to her son Jacob. Betty would like to write, “Don’t go with bad women, do be a good boy; wear your thick shirts; and come back, come back, come back to me,” but she bites her tongue, and instead of giving him motherly advice, fills her letter with news from home (Woolf, \textit{Jacob’s Room} 77).

Jacob, likewise, also makes deliberate choices about what to include or not to include in his letters to his mother, especially on his travels abroad. Jacob has many adventures in Paris with Jinny, Cruttendon, and Mallinson, but he cannot even put his new emotions into words, let alone try to write them down, and is very careful about what he writes to Betty: “Jacob had nothing to hide from his mother. It was only that he could make no sense himself of his extraordinary excitement, and as for writing it down—“ (Woolf, \textit{Jacob’s Room} 114).

In \textit{Jacob’s Room}, information that the narrator provides produces the contrast between what actually happens and what the characters describe happening in their letters. It is the narrator’s description of Betty that contrasts with what she writes in her letter, and it is the narrator that describes Jacob’s wild nights in Paris, and how he decides to write his letters carefully. The one character in the novel whose thoughts the narrator cannot access is Jacob himself. Sue Roe writes that in \textit{Jacob’s Room}, Woolf wanted to

\textsuperscript{11} Although the characters’ conversations in the book make it clear that letters are safely delivered and not lost, descriptions in the text suggest that putting letters in the mail can be problematic. After finishing her letter to Captain Barfoot, Betty Flanders looks for a stamp. She cannot find one and ends up emptying her purse to look for it, but to no avail. In addition, outside Jacob’s apartment, the narrator describes an odd event. A postal van almost hits a little girl putting a letter in a mailbox. She ends up dropping the letter in the box and running off, scared.
“stress the extent to which one human being must remain in ignorance of the vagaries of the mind of another” (xiii). These passages from the novel illustrate this idea:

The light drenched Jacob from head to toe. You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces; bare hands; and face.

It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fell, fell. This was in his face.

Whether we know what was in his mind is another question. (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 81)

The light from the street lamp highlights Jacob’s physical appearance, but also serves as a reminder that the workings of his mind are inaccessible, for the narrator often describes Jacob’s actions and reports on the other character’s thoughts, but never depicts Jacob’s internal state. So although Jacob is the title character of Jacob’s Room, the portrait of him that emerges in the text is incomplete and only emphasizes how much of his interiority is concealed instead of how much of it can be revealed. The treatment of Jacob in the text parallels his treatment of letters. Instead of presenting a full account of what he experiences, Jacob’s letters are full of omissions and only partially describe the different persons, places, and events that are important to his life. The mystical Mrs. Jarvis sums up the relationship between Jacob’s letters and the way Jacob is presented in the text when she says to Jacob’s mother: “Jacob’s letters are so like him” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 114).12

Betty Flanders’ letter to Archer, which discusses Jacob’s life after he has come back from Greece, does not present an accurate account of what Jacob is doing. Betty

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12 In “The Shaping of Jacob’s Room: Woolf’s Manuscript Revisions” EL Bishop examines Woolf’s revisions to the first drafts of Jacob’s Room and conclude that the purpose behind the majority of her edits was to make Jacob a more elusive character.
writes that Jacob is hard at work, although the narrator describes him meeting with Bonamy in Hyde Park, sketching pictures in the sand (Ohmann 169). Howards End, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, and Miss Lonelyhearts also contain letters that deliberately misrepresent events in the novel, continuing to divorce the epistolary form from character subjectivity.

In Chapter 28 of Howards End, Helen has dragged Leonard Bast and his wife Jacky to Evie Wilcox’s wedding to show Henry that his hasty financial advice has had serious consequences. While walking back to their estate, Margaret and Henry come across Jacky Bast, who automatically recognizes Henry; she used to be his mistress when he was working in Cyprus. Margaret decides to forgive Henry and protect his secret infidelities. Instead of trying to help the Basts, she wants to sever her relationship with them, so after attempting to write to Henry, she picks up her pen again and writes a note to Leonard and to Helen.

Dear Mr. Bast,
I have spoken to Mr. Wilcox about you, as I promised, and am sorry to say that he has no vacancy for you.

Yours truly,
M. J. Schlegel (Forster 190)

Dear Helen,
Give him this. The Basts are no good. Henry found the woman drunk on the lawn. I am having a room got ready for you here, and will you please come round at once on getting this? The Basts are not at all the type we should trouble about. I may go round to them myself in the morning, and do anything that is fair.

M. (Forster 190-91)

These letters intentionally misrepresent the situation. Margaret tells Leonard that Henry has no positions available for him, when in reality she and Henry want to forget his past and do not want to help the husband of his former mistress. She also is not honest with
Helen about why Henry refuses to help them. Margaret knows that Helen dislikes Henry and blames him for the Bast’s poverty, so she does not want to tell her sister about the affair he had with Jacky. Henry did find Jacky, perhaps drunk, on the lawn, but the real reason Leonard remains unemployed is that Henry does not want people to know of his affair ten years ago. In addition, Margaret’s language here strongly resembles the business rhetoric of the Wilcoxes, demonstrating how her character has changed since she has decided to marry Henry. This new Margaret also writes what the narrator calls “a lying letter,” which is another omission, another letter not included in the text, as part of a ruse to get Helen down to Howards End (Forster 225). In order to trap Helen, who the Schlegels fear is mentally ill, Margaret writes her saying that the books she desires are at Howards End and that she can stop there before she returns to Germany to pick them up. Once Helen is in the house, Henry, Margaret, and a doctor plan to ambush her in the house and whisk her away so she can get some medical help. Seeing her sister pregnant, however, Margaret abandons the ruse. When Helen confronts Margaret about her duplicity when the two women are in the house alone, Margaret admits: “I told you nothing that was true” (Forster 231).

One of the letters in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, as in Howards End, also tries to misrepresent a series of events. After Connie has persuaded Duncan Forbes, an old friend, to lie and identify himself as her lover, she writes a letter to Clifford with the hope that he will immediately want to disown her and divorce her:

Dear Clifford, I am afraid what you foresaw has happened. I am really in love with another man, and do hope you will divorce me. I am staying at present with Duncan in his flat. I told you he was at Venice with us. I'm awfully unhappy for your sake: but do try to take it quietly. You don't really need me any more, and I can't bear to come back to Wragby. I'm
awfully sorry. But do try to forgive me, and divorce me and find someone better. I'm not really the right person for you, I am too impatient and selfish, I suppose. But I can't ever come back to live with you again. And I feel so frightfully sorry about it all, for your sake. But if you don't let yourself get worked up, you'll see you won't mind so frightfully. You didn't really care about me personally. So do forgive me and get rid of me. (Lawrence 313)

In this letter Connie never directly identifies Duncan as her lover. She says that she is in love with someone else, which is true, that she is staying at Duncan’s flat, which is true, and that she has seen him in Venice, which is also true. The juxtaposition of these statements, although unrelated, create the sense of a cause and effect relationship between them, giving Clifford the impression that Connie has fallen in love with Duncan, although she really loves Mellors. Connie also emphasizes her role in the affair, blaming herself for the dissolution of their marriage, minimizing Clifford’s coldness that has estranged them. Despite this written plea, Clifford holds Connie to her promise to come back to Wragby and it is there, during their last meeting, that he confronts her about her lover. Clifford sees through her lie about Duncan and knows that she cannot be in love with him. It is only during this face-to-face conversation that she tells him she is carrying Mellors’ child and wants to marry the gamekeeper.

In Howards End and Lady Chatterley’s Lover, the discourse of the heterodiegetic narrator is what allows readers to identify the lies in character letters. In Miss Lonelyhearts, however, the physical appearance of the letter is what really betrays the true intentions of the letter writer. In the section titled “Miss Lonelyhearts on a Field Trip,” Miss Lonelyhearts receives a letter from someone his co-worker calls “an admirer” (West 25). The letter is in a pink envelope and says:
Dear Miss Lonelyhearts—

I am not very good at writing so I wonder if I could have a talk with you. I am 32 years old but have had a lot of trouble in my life and am unhappily married to a cripple. I need some good advice but can’t state my case in a letter as I am not good at letters and it would take an expert to state my case. I know your a man and am glad as I don’t trust women. You were pointed out to me in Delehantys as the man who does the advice in the paper and the minute I saw you I said you can help me. You had on a blue suit and a gray hat when I came in with my husband who is a cripple.

I don’t feel so bad about asking to see you personal because I feel almost like I knew you. So please call me up at Burgess 7-7323 which is my number as I need your advice bad about my married life.

An admirer,

Fay Doyle (West 25)

This letter is the first one to address Miss Lonelyhearts as a man and not as the supposed-female columnist. Although Fay Doyle’s letter is similar to the others, especially with regards to its punctuation and grammar, the language in it, along with its physical appearance, suggests Mrs. Doyle is looking for more than advice. Fay puts the letter in a pink envelope, signs her real name, acknowledges that she knows the man behind Miss Lonelyhearts by describing him, does not have a specific question for Miss Lonelyhearts, gives her telephone number, and repeats that she would like to meet him in person. In this situation, the letter does not represent Fay Doyle’s true thoughts and emotions, and Miss Lonelyhearts can read between the lines and identify what she does really want; his only reason for not calling her right away is that he cannot think of a moral reason not to. As Mark Conroy writes in “Letters and Spirit in Miss Lonelyhearts,” Miss Lonelyhearts is still in a stage of “[a]nger at his impotence in the face of Shrike and the paper” resulting in “the attempt to use his position to sexual
advantage” (14). Fay’s seductive voice on the telephone confirms what Miss Lonelyhearts thought was the real message of the letter, and the two meet in the park and then go back to his apartment and have sex.

Instead of being a record of a character’s thoughts, the epistolary form in *Howards End*, *Jacob’s Room*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts* becomes a locus of missing information and misrepresentation, exposing the gaps between a character’s written language and their subjective experience. In addition, the information omitted in the letters I’ve cited as examples in this section also move the epistolary form away from its original associations with transgressive female sexuality. All of the letter writers in the above examples are women, and although the situations they address in their messages are related to issues of sex and love, they never directly mention these topics in their missives. Helen’s letter to Margaret not only hides the fact that she is pregnant, but hides the fact that she slept with Leonard before she left England as well. In *Jacob’s Room*, the town of Scarborough is abuzz with gossip about Betty Flanders and Captain Barfoot. The widow and the married man seem to have some sort of relationship, and Betty writes to him several times while she is on vacation, but Betty only writes about her family and the language of her letter is very platonic. Margaret Schlegel lies to her sister about the Basts in order to keep her husband’s affair a secret. Connie Chatterley confesses her affair to her husband, although she lies about the identity of her lover. Initially, in order to protect his feelings, Connie tells Clifford that she is leaving him for the feminine artist, Duncan Forbes, instead of the hypersexual Oliver Mellors. Fay Doyle is interested in having sex with Miss Lonelyhearts, but this message is conveyed by the appearance of her letter and its envelope rather than directly in the
body of her letter. Almost all of these women are engaging in sexual relationships outside of marriage, relationships that challenge some of the institutional beliefs in society. But unlike the letters from the eighteenth century, and even Lydia Bennet’s and Rosanna Spearman’s letters cited in Chapter 1, the epistolary form in these examples is silent about sex and thus loses its power to threaten the patriarchal order.

While these “mendacious” letters demonstrate that the epistolary form in modernist literature is losing contact with its origins in the epistolary novel, they also show that letters are participating in a larger trend in modernist fiction—miscommunication. Modernist fiction often explores scenes of miscommunication, regardless the media used to communicate. Some of this miscommunication is unintentional. For example, after the Wilcoxes moved across the street from the Schlegels, Mrs. Wilcox calls on Margaret. Margaret, with memories of Helen, Paul, Aunt Juley, and Charles on her mind, sends Mrs. Wilcox a note refusing her invitation to meet because of the disgrace the Schlegels have caused the Wilcox family. Mrs. Wilcox writes a sharp rebuke back, saying “Dear Miss Schlegel, You should not have written me such a letter. I called to tell you that Paul has gone abroad. Ruth Wilcox” (Forster 53). Margaret is ashamed of what she originally said. She hurries over to the Wilcox’s flat and confronts Mrs. Wilcox about her embarrassing behavior. The ensuing conversation causes the two women to begin their friendship. In Ulysses, Stephen Dedalus receives a telegram from his father telling him that his mother is on her deathbed and urging him to return to Dublin. But a typo in the message causes it to read “Nother dying come home

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13 When the two women meet, Mrs. Wilcox is described as writing letters.
father,” which is why Stephen calls it “a curiosity to show” (Joyce 35). Other moments of miscommunication are intentional, like the letters discussed above. In Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Richard Dalloway desperately tries to tell his wife he loves her, but in the end the only thing he can do is bring her flowers and suggest that she take an afternoon nap. In Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier, Edward Ashburnham receives a telegram from Nancy Rufford, reading, “Safe Brindisi. Having rattling good time. Nancy” (Ford 277). Likewise, this cryptic note, which seems to deny Nancy’s passionate love of Edward, appears to be the final push that drives him to suicide. The letters in Howards End, Jacob’s Room, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, and Miss Lonelyhearts have moved away from their traditional associations from the eighteenth century and are aligned with more general trends in modernist fiction.

“Speech attempted”: The Struggle to Write

The difficulty of communicating in modernist fiction extends to letter writing as well as letter reading. In her digression on the role correspondence plays in life, the narrator of Jacob’s Room describes letters as “speech attempted.” This phrase stresses that the letter tries to replicate the speech act, but that sometimes it fails, calling attention to the ways that language is unable to capture our thoughts. Putting one’s thoughts and emotions into words is often a hard or ineffective exercise in Howards End, Jacob’s Room, and Absalom, Absalom!, because when characters are shown trying to write letters, they have difficulties expressing themselves.

14 Early editors of Ulysses, originally assumed the typo was not intentional and that Joyce meant to write, “Mother dying come home father.” Hans Walter Gabler’s edition fixed this error along with many others in his 1986 edition of the text (Ellmann)
When Margaret makes the horrifying discovery that Jacky has been Henry’s mistress while he lived in Cyprus, she is unnerved by the situation and tries to sit down and write some letters. The first one she begins is to Henry and is an attempt to reassure him that her knowledge of his past will not destroy their future life together. However, she cannot find the appropriate language to express her emotions without offending her fiancé. The narrator notes: “the gentle words that she forced out through her pen seemed to proceed from some other person” (Forster 189).

"My dearest boy," she began, “this is not to part us. It is everything or nothing, and I mean it to be nothing. It happened long before we ever met, and even if it had happened since, I should be writing the same, I hope. I do understand."

But she crossed out "I do understand"; it struck a false note. Henry could not bear to be understood. She also crossed out, "It is everything or nothing." Henry would resent so strong a grasp of the situation. She must not comment; comment is unfeminine.

"I think that'll about do," she thought. (Forster 189-90)

Margaret does not finish her letter. The only way that she can convey her feelings to Henry is through a face-to-face conversation.

In Jacob’s Room, Betty Flanders has a similar difficulty when she receives a marriage proposal from Andrew Floyd, a man who has been tutoring her sons. Mr. Floyd sent Betty a letter asking her to marry him, and after recovering from the shock, sits down to write him back. But the language for such a task does not come easy, and her first fitful starts are recorded: “Dear Mr. Floyd . . . I am much surprised,” although she ends up writing a more articulate response later (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 15). While in Greece, Jacob faces a similar form of writer’s block as he corresponds with his friend Bonamy. Despite several exchanges, Jacob cannot express his thoughts about what he has seen abroad in a way to make his friend understand what he is feeling. After reading Jacob’s
sentence, “I intend to come to Greece every year so long as I live,” Bonamy thinks, sighing, “Goodness knows what he means by that” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 128). Jacob has even more problems putting his pen to paper and writing to his friend when he falls in love with Sandra Wentworth Williams: “When bedtime came the difficulty was to write to Bonamy, Jacob found. Yet he had seen Salamis, and Marathon in the distance. Poor old Bonamy! No; there was something queer about it. He could not write to Bonamy” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 129).

As in Howards End and Jacob’s Room, in Absalom, Absalom! there seems to be some anxiety that words cannot express exactly what the writer feels. In each included letter in the text, the writer rethinks a word choice, as if the language he used originally could not clearly articulate what he thought. “It hasn’t stopped of course; I don’t mean that. I mean, there has never been any more of it,” writes Charles Bon to Judith; “hope—You see I have written hope, not think,” writes Mr. Compson to his son; “It is in this behalf that I write. No: I will not say behalf,” writes the lawyer in a letter to Henry Sutpen (Faulkner 104; 302; 251-2). In each instance the writer cannot find the correct words that he needs and language is viewed as slippery and inaccurate.

The depiction of correspondence as problematic continues to recontextualize the character element of the epistolary tradition by highlighting the gaps between language and thought and suggesting that written language can never accurately represent what a person is thinking.
Letters as “the unpublished works”: The Epistolary Form and Art

These last two uses of 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.

The term *mise en abyme* has its origins in heraldry and was first used by the French author André Gide, who was also writing in the early twentieth century. Gide’s initial definition of the term is: “the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield ‘en abyme’ within [the shield]” (Dällenbach 7). For a visual picture of a heraldic *mise en abyme*, imagine a shield of an aristocratic family, shrink down the size of the shield, and place the smaller shield back into its larger, original counterpart. One example of a literary *mise en abyme* would be the play “The
Mousetrap” in Hamlet—it is a play within a play. Because the modernists view the letter as a *mise en abyme* of literature, they begin to experiment with the elements of the epistolary tradition, using letters in fiction in new ways.

In *Jacob’s Room*, letters are explicitly identified as one of the ways people can make connections, even if they are problematic or only temporary. The narrator has a negative attitude towards the social calls letters ask us to make, but also praises them for helping to provide company on life’s journey. Letters in *Jacob’s Room* are a way for characters to form connections and end their isolation, and the character who best embodies this idea is Jacob’s mother, Betty Flanders. Her letter writing is her attempt to create connections between different individuals.

As mentioned earlier, the first lines in the book are those of Betty Flanders as she writes to Captain Barfoot: “‘So of course,’ . . . ‘there was nothing for it but to leave.’” Later she continues, “‘but mercifully,’ she scribbled ‘everything seems satisfactorily arranged, packed though we are like herrings in a barrel, and forced to stand the perambulator which the landlady quite naturally won’t allow . . .’” (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 3). The Flanders family is in Cornwall, and the first image readers see of Betty is her writing to others. Her other actions in the beginning of the novel are to collect her young sons as they have scattered during their play on the seashore and to take them home.

Betty is constantly writing to her son, “Jacob Alan Flanders, Esq.,” refraining from giving him advice and only mentioning news from home (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 77).

‘Do you remember old Miss Wargrave, who used to be so kind when you had the whooping–cough?’ she wrote; ‘she’s dead at last, poor thing. They would like it if you wrote. Ellen came over and we spent a nice day
shopping. Old Mouse gets very stiff, and we have to walk him up the smallest hill. Rebecca, at last, after I don’t know how long, went into Mr. Adamson’s. Three teeth, he says, must come out. Such mild weather for the time of year, the little buds actually on the pear trees. And Mrs. Jarvis tells me—’ (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 77-78)

This quoted news is not about herself, but about people Jacob knew growing up, which continues to connect him with his family and friends from home, even in far away London. And although Jacob is not completely truthful with his mother about what he puts in his letters to her on his travels throughout Europe and Greece, he still writes her, maintaining their relationship. Betty’s letters are not quoted again until the end of the novel when she writes to her son Archer, in Singapore, before Jacob’s death. “‘Such a sunset’ . . . ‘One couldn’t make up one’s mind to come indoors’ . . . ‘It seemed wicked to waste even a moment’” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 152). Betty’s letter connects her life in Scarborough with the different worlds of her two sons, and by sharing news of Jacob with Archer, she connects the sailor and the businessman with a scholarly mind, who without her correspondence would be completely out of touch.

At the end of the Jacob’s Room, however, the connections Mrs. Flanders strove to make are no longer possible. Visiting Jacob’s apartment after his death in the war, Mrs. Flanders and Jacob’s friend Bonamy find Jacob’s letters, his means of communicating, “strewn about for any one to read” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 155). In addition, Mrs. Flanders, who has confidently known how to deal with situations ranging from the death of her husband and her family’s poverty, from keeping her children’s disgusting beach finds to rejecting marriage proposals, is suddenly lost, confused, and unsure: “‘What am I do to with these Mr. Bonamy?’ She held out a pair of Jacob’s old shoes” (Woolf, Jacob’s
Room 155). As EL Bishop argues, “What Woolf invited us to see, and what forced itself to the surface as a major concern of the novel, is the fact that life’s connectedness is perhaps only apparent and accidental, that the most ordinary moment is fraught with a myriad of possible beginnings—and also with the possibility of death” (132).

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, A Sketch of the Past 2161). 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” (Woolf, A Sketch of the Past 2161). 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” (Woolf, A Sketch of the Past 2161). 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” (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 78). 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 (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 78).

If letters are a type of unpublished novel, then Betty Flanders is an artist figure in the text. Like her successors Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsey, she becomes the weaver or Penelope figure in the book, constantly pulling different threads together, trying to create a coherent fabric out of life. Betty’s first word “So” is a homonym with the word
“sew” implying that she binds things together, and later in the chapter, she will continue to be associated with weaving when the narrator describes her knitting needles and the wool in her parlor (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 3). Mrs. Ramsey tries to connect individuals over a dinner and Mrs. Dalloway uses her parties to bring people together. Betty’s medium, however, is epistolarity—her letter writing is how she makes connections. It is only fitting that after Jacob’s death, his letters (unopened) are strewn all over the floor, because after the horrific events of the war, the fabric Mrs. Flanders has been weaving is unraveling.15

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 brings a letter from his mother up with her, and the narrator, instead of reporting what happens, “creates another history” (Morgenstern 358). 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

15 The narrator is also another weaver figure and thus an artist. Although Jacob is the title character, the narrator in *Jacob’s Room* is also one of the most important figures in the text. As Barry Morgenstern writes in “The Self-Conscious Narrator in *Jacob’s Room*”: “*Jacob’s Room* is a book about a twenty-five year old man—Jacob—and a thirty-five-year-old woman—the narrator” (352). The narrator’s role in the text is to try to make connections: “Certainly in *Jacob’s Room*, Jacob’s character is broken up into threads: Mrs. Flanders, Florinda, Richard Bonamy, the lady in the train to Cambridge, etc. But finally all the salvaged threads are rewoven by the narrator. This reconstituted cloth is not the same as the first; made up of strands of one thing it forms a new thing—like a collage made out of pre-existing but now disengaged snippets, it is a picture of the speaker, our thirty-five-year-old-woman” (Morgenstern 361).
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). 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” (Peters 9). Peters’ phrase “lapse into cliché” also accurately describes the prose of Clifford’s letter. At a first glance, his metaphor is complex and thought provoking, but on a second look, it just repeats age-old arguments about the supremacy of the upper class. The prose of the Mellors section also relies on metaphor, but these metaphors are more substantive because “they create meanings that do not otherwise exist” (Peters 9). This way of using metaphors is present in Mellors’ letter to Connie. Like the narrator of the novel, when he describes their sex life in its chaste state, he compares their current experience to another experience, equally hard to articulate and illustrate. He loves chastity “like snowdrops love the snow.” Again he compares this chastity to a phrase that sounds like an everyday maxim, but one whose meaning is hard to understand. As Lydia Blanchard writes in “Lawrence, Foucault, and the Language of Sexuality”:
Like the novel as a whole, the letter moves through a variety of approaches to novel-writing—opening with a gossipy realism concerned with money and the precise details of Mellors’ job; moving into a middle section that recalls the didactic preaching of Lawrence as Victorian sage . . .; shifting from realism and didacticism to the importance of symbol and image (the forked flame, the crocus, the great gasping white hands), as Lawrence was so effectively to use image and symbol himself in his own created novels. (30-31)

Mellors’ letter is a miniature form of Lawrence’s novel, commenting on the world and using symbols and images to represent experience.

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 (Martin). 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 (Kuzmanovic). 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.
The impersonal style of both Clifford’s and Mellors’ letters in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is the same type of language as that used in the newspaper column in Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts.* In his column, Miss Lonelyhearts answers individual letters, genuine expressions of emotions, with the public, empty rhetoric of the features section. The personal aspect of the letters is connected to art and literature in the text, and like the letters, art is also rejected in the world of the novella. Many of the people who work with Miss Lonelyhearts have lost faith in the beliefs that previously gave them hope, and art is one of them: “They were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves. At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything” (West 14). Shrike, the features editor, who views the Miss Lonelyhearts column as a joke, continually ridicules art in the text, especially as a means of salvation.

But before he had written a dozen words, Shrike leaned over his shoulder. “The same old stuff,” Shrike said. “Why don’t you tell them about art. Here, I’ll dictate”

> “Art Is a Way Out.
> “Do not let life overwhelm you. When the old paths are choked with the debris of failure, look for newer and fresher paths. Art is just such a path. Art is distilled from suffering. As Mr. Polnikoff exclaimed through his fine Russian beard, when, at the age, of eighty-six, he gave up his business to learn Chinese, ‘We are, as yet, only at the beginning. . . .’
> “Art Is One of Life’s Richest Offerings.
> “For those who have not the talent to create, there is appreciation. For those . . .
> “Go on from there.” (West 4)

As he teases Miss Lonelyhearts “in the Dismal Swamp” and lists all the means of escape, Shrike also lists art as a way to retreat from the letters (West 30).
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” (West 32). The idea that

16 In his article, “West’s Revisions of Miss Lonelyhearts,” Carter Daniel notes that Miss Lonelyhearts originally had a name, Thomas Matlock, and that the book was written in first-person narration (232-3).
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 (Conroy 5).

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, Broken-hearted, 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. (West 25)17

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.

Poetry is another form type of writing in Faulkner’s work that preserves the past. Rosa Coldfield is the unofficial poet laureate of Jefferson County and has written hundreds, or even as General Compson notes, thousands of poems about the Civil War,

17 This surreal trash pile calls to mind images in TS Eliot’s The Waste Land, and many critics have explored the connections between West’s work and Eliot’s. For more on how West’s use of The Waste Land’s imagery and themes critique Eliot’s ideas about authority, see Miriam Fuchs’ “Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts: The Waste Land Rescripted.”
and her sewing of a wedding gown for her cousin Judith also connects her to the figure of Penelope, the quintessential modernist artist.18 When she describes her role as an author, Rosa emphasizes the idea that letters preserve the past: “she embalmed the war and its heritage of suffering and injustice and sorrow in the backsides of the pages of an old account book, embalming blotting from the breathable air the poisonous secret effluvium of lusting and hating and killing” (Faulkner 137). Like written art in the narrative, Bon’s letter to Judith is held up in the text as a physical object from the past that fights the process of decay.

The last included letter in Absalom, Absalom! is written from Bon’s mother’s lawyer to Henry Sutpen. Although convoluted and enigmatic, it is a letter of introduction; the lawyer says that he is writing in hope that the two young men will meet at school:

My Dear Mr. Sutpen: The undersigned name will not be known to you, nor are the writer’s position and circumstances, for all their reflected worth and (I hope) value, so unobscure as to warrant the hope that he will ever see you in person or you he—worth reflected from and value rendered to two persons of birth, one of whom, lady and widowed mother, resides in that seclusion befitting her condition in the city from which this letter is inscribed, the other of whom, a young gentleman, her son, will either be as you read this, or will shortly thereafter be a petitioner before the same Bar of knowledge and wisdom as yourself. It is in this behalf that I write. No: I will not say behalf; certainly I shall not let his lady mother or the young gentleman himself suspect that I used that term, even to one, Sir, scion of the principal family of that country as it is your fortunate lot to be. Indeed it would be better for me if I had not written at all. But I do; I have; it is irrevocable now; if you discern aught in this letter with smacks of humility, take it as coming not from the mother and certainly not from the son, but from the pen of one whose humble position as legal advisor and man of business to the above lady and young gentleman, whose loyalty and gratitude toward one whose generosity has found him (I do not confess this; I proclaim it) in bread and meat and fire and shelter over a period long enough to have taught him gratitude and loyalty even if he

18 The fact that Rosa tries to weave a wedding gown for Judith was suggested to me by Linda Kauffman’s Discourses of Desire, although instead of identifying Rosa with Penelope, she identifies her with Ariadne, because she has to watch the South unravel (274).
had not known them, has led him into an action whose means fall behind its intention for the reason that he is only what he is and profess himself to be, not what he would. So take this Sir, neither as unwarranted insolence which an unsolicited communication from myself to you would be, not as a plea for sufferance on behalf of an unknown, but as an introduction, (clumsy though it be) to one young gentleman whose position needs neither detailing nor recapitulation in the place where this letter is read, of another young gentleman whose position requires neither detailing nor recapitulation in the place where it was written. (Faulkner 251-52)

The anonymous lawyer begins his letter by introducing himself and his clients and hints at his reason for writing; the young man that he speaks of, Charles Bon, will be a law student at Mississippi State like Henry. The lawyer describes himself as being a humble man, compared to his clients, and says that this letter is a gesture of “gratitude” because the family has been so generous to him. His client’s son is moving away from home and he is hoping to introduce him to other young men at his new school. However, this letter is full of lies. The lawyer has no interest in helping Bon and his mother. In the last narrative sequence of *Absalom, Absalom!*, he is the one who is portrayed as a villain, the architect of the Sutpen family downfall. He manipulates Sutpen’s ex-wife, keeps up with Sutpen’s whereabouts, and tries to estimate the plantation owner’s accounts so that he could blackmail him. He is the one who suggests that Bon go to Mississippi State and writes this letter so that Henry and Bon would meet, ensuring that Sutpen would eventually have to come face-to-face with the life he left behind in the West Indies. Near the end of the war, Bon receives a letter from the octoroon saying that this lawyer, who tried to portray himself as a loyal servant of the family, killed Bon’s mother and stole all of her money.

Unlike the other two included letters in the text, this letter is not real, i.e. it is not presented as an actual, material document in the text. It is only a product of Quentin and
Shreve’s imagination as they try to explain what caused Henry to shoot Charles Bon.
This letter from the lawyer, along with the letters that Bon waits for from his father and the ones that he is forbidden to send to Judith, are nothing more than guesswork.\(^{19}\)
Faulkner’s use of the letter in this way plays with the object element of the epistolary tradition. In epistolary novels, letters needed to be successfully sent and received in order for the action in the story to take place, and the physical object of the letter often took on a symbolic importance. But in this example, some of the letters that are included in the text and talked about by the characters do not even exist; they are nothing but fictions created to support arguments about historical events.

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

\(^{19}\) Krause also notes that Shreve invents several letters, and that five times during Chapter VIII, Shreve images or imagines the reception, interpretation, and reading of those letters. For more see Krause’s “Reading Shreve’s Letters and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*”

116
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.

The goal of this chapter was to provide a more general overview of the letters’ use in modernist fiction. Chapter 3 uses the works of James Joyce as a case study, examining how one author’s use of the letter develops over his artistic career.
CHAPTER 3

“All the world’s in want and is writing a letters”:

Joyce’s Experiments with the Epistolary Form

James Joyce’s Ulysses reflects the changes taking place in the way people communicated at the turn of the century in a busy city like Dublin. Stephen sends his roommate Mulligan a telegram to cancel a meeting, and Leopold Bloom makes a telephone call to the office of the Evening Telegraph, which illustrates the other characters’ attitudes towards him. But letters and letter writing are what play a central role in the life of the characters in the novel, because throughout the day, Bloom and others read letters, write letters, and receive letters: Bloom corresponds with Martha Clifford; Mr. Deasy wants to publish his letter on hoof and mouth disease in the paper; the Citizen and his cohorts at Barney Kiernan’s read letters of application written by barely literate hangmen; and, perhaps most importantly, Molly Bloom receives a letter from Blazes Boylan, confirming their rendezvous at four o’clock in the afternoon. The epistolary form continues to be an important thematic and structural element in Finnegans Wake; few letters appear in Joyce’s early works, such as Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Part of Joyce’s progress as a writer, then, is his decision to use the epistolary form extensively in his later fiction.
In this chapter, I will examine Joyce’s development as an author and his changing use of the epistolary form. Initially, like his contemporaries, Joyce is interested in representing character subjectivity and uses free indirect thought and focalization to do so. But Joyce often focalizes through and reports on the thoughts of a single character, replicating some of the traditional functions of the letter in fiction. In *Ulysses*, Joyce begins to use interior monologue in his writing, allowing character thoughts to be directly recorded in the text, making the epistolary form seem superfluous. Instead of abandoning the letter, however, Joyce uses it to explore the way language fails to represent subjectivity, rejecting the character element of the epistolary tradition and disrupting the relationship between letters and external readers. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce moves away from questions of subjectivity and focuses on questions of language and experience; he experiments with the narrative and object elements of the epistolary tradition and ultimately uses the letter to question the impact language has on reality. Letters in Joyce’s fiction can also be seen as a *mise en abyme*, but he exceeds other modernist writers’ use of the epistolary form by directly equating the letter with his own art in *Finnegans Wake*.

**Dubliners**

The epistolary form was traditionally viewed as a literary technique for using writing to represent the human consciousness, and in his early fiction, *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce attempts to represent a single character’s consciousness as directly as possible to his readers without making unnecessary changes to the text. His first attempt is in his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, which he
worked on from 1904-1907, but which was not published collectively until 1914 because of objections from several publishers. In the first story, “The Sisters,” the anonymous narrator meditates on the word “paralysis,” which is the one of the recurrent themes of the collection (D 19). As Joyce wrote to his friend C.P. Curran, “I call the series Dubliners to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (SL 22). Joyce uses focalization and free indirect discourse to represent the consciousness of his characters in Dubliners, and each story is a brief psychological portrait of a character during a critical moment in his or her life, when he or she struggles against, and ultimately succumbs to, the paralyzing forces of family, religion, and politics.1

Many of the stories in Dubliners are told by a heterodiegetic narrator, and those that are are usually focalized through a single main character, which limits the external readers’ view of the storyworld to what the main character sees.2 Joyce also uses free indirect thought to paint psychological portraits of his characters in specific moments in their lives, but without superfluous punctuation and language, such as quotation marks and phrases like “he thought,” without introducing other forms in the text, such as a letter or a diary, and without an unnecessary narratee. The modernist authors in Chapter 2 use focalization and free indirect thought not only to present the subjectivity of a main character, called a center of consciousness, but to present the subjectivity of other characters, producing a narrative told from multiple perspectives. Joyce, on the other

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1 Although not all Joyce critics agree, I think that Gabriel Conroy actually achieves an epiphany in “The Dead,” unlike the rest of the characters in the stories.
2 The first three stories in the Dubliners collection, “The Sisters,” “An Encounter,” and “Araby” are told by a first person, or homodiegetic narrator.
hand, often confines the perspective and thought reporting in *Dubliners* to just one character, a decision that creates strong parallels between Joyce’s short stories and the character element of the epistolary tradition.

Examining the story “Eveline” demonstrates how both focalization and free indirect thought allow Joyce to represent the subjective experiences of a single character. The opening of the story shows how an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator, a heterodiegetic narrator focalizing through a character, and free indirect thought work side by side to represent a character’s consciousness:

She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains, and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. She was tired.

Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it — not like their little brown houses, but bright brick houses with shining roofs. (D 46)

The first two sentences are a distant view of Eveline, describing her looking out the window. The language of these sentences, with their metaphorical description of twilight and the acute attention given to what Eveline smells, indicates that the voice speaking is probably not Eveline’s voice, because in the text she is depicted as a lower class woman who works in a shop. The next sentence, which describes how Eveline feels, is more simplistic and sounds more like the language she might use: “She was tired.” The sentences, “Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home” are examples of the narrator focalizing through Eveline; he describes what she sees out the window. But again, when the narrator begins to discuss Eveline’s
memories, “One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every
evening with other people's children,” the words in the description sound like ones
Eveline would choose if she were talking. The narrator’s distinctive voice introduces the
story, but readers are slowly drawn into Eveline’s character as their vision of the
storyworld is soon limited by her sight and as they are exposed to a voice that sounds like
her own when the narrator talks about her feelings or her memories. The use of free
indirect thought in this story allows Eveline’s own voice to come out in the text, even
though nothing that she says is directly quoted. The “free” quality of free indirect
thought also allows Joyce to move seamlessly between the different narrative techniques
he employs without punctuation marks, phrases, a change of form, or a narratee. Joyce’s
decision to focalize through Eveline and to only report on her thoughts demonstrates how
language can represent a character’s subjectivity, which was the function of the letter in
eighteenth-century fiction, laying the foundation for the character element of the
epistolary tradition

In *Dubliners*, Joyce works on refining his ability to represent human
consciousness to his external readers and does not really experiment with the epistolary
form. There are only three stories where letters appear in *Dubliners*: “Eveline,”
“Counterparts,” and “The Dead.” In “The Dead” there is a sentence quoted from a letter
that Gabriel wrote when he was first in love with his wife Gretta that is used to reveal
Gabriel’s past internal state to readers of the story.³ As Gretta and Gabriel Conroy return

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³ Another vision from the past in “The Dead” is Gabriel touching a letter. “Moments of their secret life
together burst like stars upon his memory. A heliotrope envelope was lying beside his breakfast-cup and he
was caressing it with his hand. Birds were twittering in the ivy and the sunny web of the curtain was
shimmering along the floor: he could not eat for happiness” (D 231). Much is unknown about this letter;
the content of the actual letter is never revealed and the reader can only assume it is from Gretta. Gabriel’s
to their hotel after the Misses Morkan’s Christmas party, Gabriel’s thoughts turn to memories of their relationship, and two of his memories specifically center on letters written during the early days of their courtship. In the carriage, Gabriel remembers part of a letter he wrote to Gretta: “In one letter that he had written to her then he had said: *Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?*” (D 232). Although it is only a fragment, this quotation is the first time an included letter, or more accurately part of an included letter, is presented in Joyce’s works. Here, because it is such a small section, the actual format of the text isn’t changed to reproduce the physical form of the letter. The sentence from this letter is used to illustrate Gabriel’s feelings for Gretta, particularly in certain “moments of ecstasy,” and is used to build tension in the main narrative of the story (D 232). Gabriel is filled with desire and is anxious to get Gretta back to the hotel, only to have his visions of their past together and his expectations for the evening wither away when Gretta reveals her past life with Michael Furey. Gabriel’s memories of the past are filled with detailed images from his life with Gretta, but this is the only place in this section of the story where he articulates his feelings in his own voice; as in the other stories in *Dubliners*, throughout “The Dead” a heterodiegetic narrator describes Gabriel’s emotions and actions. The content of the letter is a physical representation of Gabriel’s thoughts, and the language of the paragraph surrounding the quotation calls attention to the fact that these words are written down on paper, leaving a record of Gabriel’s emotions. Maybe “caressing” of the letter would not have been an unusual way to treat such correspondence, especially in Victorian times. As mentioned previously, in her book, *Correspondence and American Literature*, Beth Hewitt notes that in romantic epistolary relationships the love letter was often transformed into a physical representation of the lover. The color of the letter’s envelope becomes an important theme in *Finnegans Wake*. For example, the word “heliotrope” is the answer to Issy’s riddle that Shem the Penman cannot guess.
this is why he could remember something specific he had said to Gretta—because it was written down in a letter. The sentence following the letter also calls attention to the physical words on the page: “Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past” (D 232). In a moment of synesthesia, the words on the page are transformed into an audible sound, moving through time, connecting him to the past and forming a bridge to future thoughts as he imagines himself and Gretta alone in their hotel room about to make love.

This one-sentenced quotation from a letter specifically references Joyce’s own correspondence. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann points out the similarities between this quotation from Gabriel’s letter to Gretta and a couple of sentences Joyce wrote to his wife Nora in one of his letters to her when they were first dating. Joyce wrote to Nora: “And yet why should I be ashamed of words? Why should I not call you what in my heart I continually call you? What is it that prevents me unless it be that no word is tender enough to be your name” (SL 31). This sentence suggests that as a writer Joyce has a preference for the epistolary form. An avid letter writer, Joyce with this one sentence draws a connection between his own personal writing and his art, a move that will be repeated in Ulysses and in Finnegans Wake.

**A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**

In his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce continued his experiments in representing a single character’s consciousness using internal focalization and free indirect thought. However, instead of just focusing on the psychological state of a character in a single moment of time, Joyce is striving to show a person’s development
over time and the events that led to the formation of his personality. All the events in *A Portrait* are shown through the main character Stephen Dedalus’ eyes, and the majority of the language used in the text matches the language Stephen would use at certain stages of development in his life. An incident between Stephen and one of his schoolfellows illustrates how Joyce continued to use both focalization and free indirect thought in *A Portrait*:

They all laughed again. Stephen tried to laugh with them. He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed. But Wells must know the right answer for he was in third of grammar. He tried to think of Wells's mother but he did not dare to raise his eyes to Wells's face. He did not like Wells's face. It was Wells who had shouldered him into the square ditch the day before because he would not swop his little snuff box for Wells's seasoned hacking chestnut, the conqueror of forty. It was a mean thing to do; all the fellows said it was. And how cold and slimy the water had been! And a fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum. (P 253)

In Book 1, Stephen is about seven to nine years old, and his language, though descriptive, is the language of a younger child. His inability to completely understand Wells’ joke demonstrates that this incident is told from his perspective. Joyce continues to use these techniques of representing consciousness throughout the novel, until Stephen decides to leave Ireland and go to Europe. At this point the discourse of the narrative changes to a journal, and the novel ends with Stephen’s attempt to represent his own subjective experience in writing.

In his biography of James Joyce, Richard Ellmann writes that, “Joyce’s first interior monologue was inserted at the end of *A Portrait*,” but his description of the language of

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4 The most apparent disconnect between Stephen’s language and his age is at the beginning of the novel. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out in *Narrative Fiction*, the language at the beginning of *A Portrait* is that of a young child, but “a baby who wets the bed . . . is incapable of formulating complete sentences” like the ones that open the text (74).
the journal is not completely accurate (368). H. Porter Abbott defines interior monologue as “The thinking and feeling of a character conveyed without the usual grammatical signs of narration medication (e.g. quotation marks or the phrases ‘he said, she said’),” so the diary entry format which frames the language at the end of A Portrait prevents it from being true interior monologue (192). The journal did allow Joyce to directly present character thoughts to the reader, unlike free indirect thought, which, as its names implies, only allows for an indirect presentation of thought through the heterodiegetic narrator.\(^5\)

Ellmann comments on some of the positive benefits of the form: “[The journal] had a dramatic justification there in that Stephen could no longer communicate with anyone in Ireland but himself. But it had a way of relaxing by sentence fragments and seeming casual connections among thoughts the more formal style of most of the narratives” (368). On the other hand, the journal format required an awkward switch to a new genre that hadn’t been present in the novel previously; nothing else in the text indicates that Stephen has been recording his thoughts in a journal or a diary. Inspired by other writers such as Edouard Dujardin, George Moore, Tolstoy, and Freud, in his next work, Joyce would begin to use interior monologue to directly present character thoughts to the reader without any accoutrements or forced forms. “Having gone so far, Joyce in Ulysses boldly eliminated the journal, and let thoughts hop, step, jump, and glide without the self-consciousness of a journal to account for their agitation” (Ellmann 369).

There is one letter in A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man, which is in Book I. It is a letter that Stephen imagines himself writing to his mother to tell her that he is sick.

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\(^5\) Sylvia Beeretz in “Tell Us in Plain Words:” Narrative Strategies in Joyce’s Ulysses, gives a description of free indirect discourse (another term synonymous with free indirect thought) and suggests why it should be considered indirect. The language of free indirect thought is “told as if formulated by the character himself, but it is not directly identified as running through his mind” (25).
Dear Mother,
   I am sick. I want to go home. Please come and take me home. I am in the infirmary.

Your fond son,
Stephen (P 264)

The language of his letter clearly represents Stephen’s thoughts. With its short sentences, repetitive style, and simple words, this letter contains the language of a young child, and because it mirrors the language in the text, continues to add to the portrayal of Stephen’s character in this section of the novel as a very young and innocent boy. What is interesting about the letter, however, is that it is completely invented. Stephen does not write it down; it is his idea of the type of message he would send to his parents to let them know he is sick. So although use of the letter in fiction was rooted in its mimetic form and its ability to represent reality, in A Portrait, the letter becomes a fantasy and a product of the imagination. This short note shows that despite his focus using different narrative techniques for representing human consciousness, Joyce still sees the letter as a necessary part of his fiction. In this example, he is still using the letter to show that language can reveal a subjective experience, but the imaginary nature of the letter shows that he is also starting to see the potential of the letter as a form he can experiment with.

Ulysses

Ulysses, published in 1922, retells the story of Homer’s Odyssey in an early twentieth-century setting. One of the reasons Ulysses is an important development in the history of the novel is that it was the first consistent integration of new literary techniques, specifically interior monologue, and a related technique, stream of
consciousness, into traditional fictional forms. Joyce did not make his mark on literary history by inventing either technique; he maintained that he discovered stream of consciousness in the French novel *Les lauriers sont coupés* written by Edouard Dujardin in 1888 (Beeretz 41). What Joyce did do in *Ulysses* is effectively combine interior monologue with other forms of narration in the novel and refine the use of stream of consciousness technique in particular. As David Hayman notes of Joyce’s use of stream of consciousness in Ulysses: The Mechanics of Meaning, “He used the technique as he did many others to do specific jobs, and principally, to bring into unusually sharp focus the alert conscious minds of individuals whose character he wished to define quickly, completely, and unmistakably before dissolving individuality and disclosing the basis of character in hidden impulses” (83). The use of both interior monologue and stream of consciousness “. . . allows us a glimpse of the nature and the workings of the human mind in general” (Beeretz 41).

With the word “Chrysostomos,” which Stephen thinks as he looks at Buck Mulligan’s golden toothed mouth in “Telemachus,” Joyce had completed his aesthetic project of attempting to present a single character’s consciousness to the reader without

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6 Before discussing Joyce’s works, it is necessary to present some clarification about two important terms used in this section, interior monologue and stream of consciousness. A lot of critics conflate the two, but they are very different techniques, and in order to define them, I will draw on definitions of both by Sylvia Beeretz in “Tell Us in Plain Words:” Narrative Strategies in Joyce’s Ulysses. Interior monologue is a representation of a character’s thoughts, but is often well organized, logical, and grammatically correct, as if “the character seems to be silently talking to himself (endophasy)” (40). An example of this in *Ulysses* is at the end of the “Telemachus” chapter. Stephen is fed up with Buck Mulligan’s insults and Haines’ nightmares. His thoughts about his living situation are presented to the reader, but in a very ordinary way: “I will not sleep here tonight. Home also I cannot go” (U 19). Stream of consciousness is a variation of the interior monologue technique and is illogical, driven by association, full of imagery, and often lacks grammatical punctuation. As Beeretz puts it “it consists of the flux of mental images, preverbal feelings, random associations and physical sensations of which the characters themselves need not be aware” (40). The most famous example of stream of consciousness in *Ulysses* is the “Penelope” episode, Molly Bloom’s musings as she drifts off to sleep. The chapter in the Gabler edition is 36 pages long, only contains eight period marks, has little capitalization, and jumps randomly from past to present, from topic to topic.
any auxiliary forms or switches in genre. Interior monologue and stream of consciousness allowed him to present one character’s thoughts directly to the reader. With the use of these new techniques, the included letter became an outdated form for representing the psychological states of characters. But Joyce decided not to abandon the letter and, like other modernist writers, used the epistolary form in literature in new ways. He saw the letter as a place where he could continue his experiments with representing subjectivity through written language; thus Joyce built on the character element of the epistolary tradition, but took it in a new direction. Instead of showing that written language could clearly represent experience, he uses the letter to experiment with the ways language cannot clearly represent experience—the ways in which language fails to capture human thought.

One of the facets of letters that Joyce explored was how to represent the mental processes involved in everyday activities like reading and writing. An example of this is in the “Nestor” chapter. Stephen finishes teaching his class and then has a discussion with his employer Mr. Deasy, who is attempting to be his mentor. Mr. Deasy asks Stephen to read a letter he has written about foot and mouth disease before he submits it to the newspaper. The text of Mr. Deasy’s letter is not directly reproduced within Ulysses; external readers of the text only have access to it through Stephen’s thoughts. Here is an excerpt of what the reader sees:

May I trespass on your valuable space. That doctrine of laissez faire which so often in our history. Our cattle trade. The way of all our old industries. Liverpool ring which jockeyed the Galway harbour scheme. European conflagration. Grain supplies through the narrow waters of the channel. The pluperfect imperturbability of the department of agriculture. Pardoned a classical allusion. Cassandra. By a woman who was no better than she should be. To come to the point at issue. (U 27)
Mr. Deasy’s letter is not a complete included letter, because the full text is not presented, and readers only see the letter through the lens of Stephen’s mind. As his eyes glance over the page, Stephen does not think every word that is written; he shortens sentences, pays attention to keywords, and picks up on errors. Stephen “skims” or only quickly reads his employer’s missive. Since there are so many obvious gaps in what was written, the emphasis here is not on the letter itself, but on trying to show how Stephen’s mind works when he reads.

The letter that Bloom writes to his secret pen pal Martha Clifford in “Sirens” is similar to Mr. Deasy’s letter. Again the full text of the letter is not presented to the reader. In a chapter that is like a cubist painting, showing multiple perspectives simultaneously, “Sirens” constantly blends what the characters see, what they think, what they hear, and what they do to create a fluid, multi-sensory experience. As he eats dinner with a friend, Bloom decides to respond to a letter Martha has sent him earlier in the day, which will be discussed later. In “The Printed Letters in Ulysses,” Shari Benstock has painstakingly recreated the text of the letter from “Sirens”:


The text of Bloom’s letter is woven into the thoughts he has about writing and the events that take place in the bar. As he begins writing his letter to Martha, Bloom can’t

7 Bloom also skims Milly’s letter before the full included letter is shown to the reader in Ulysses (Benstock 416).
remember where he put the flower she enclosed her in envelope: “Hell did I put? Some pock or oth” (U 229). He wants to send Martha a little present, so he calculates how much money he has spent during the day: “Hold on. Five Dig. Two about here. Penny the gulls. Elijah is com. Seven Davy Byrne's. Is eight about. Say half a crown” (U 229). And he wonders if he should even keep up their correspondence: “Folly am I writing? Husbands don't” (U 229). Events that take place outside of the lounge, such as Boylan’s journey to Eccles Street, are narrated as Bloom continues to write his letter: “A hackney car, number three hundred and twentyfour, driver Barton James of number one Harmony avenue, Donnybrook . . .” (U 229). Near the end of its composition, Bloom is interrupted by a question from his friend Richie Goulding, but finishes up the letter, humming along to the music in the lounge as he closes. “La la la ree. Trails off there sad in minor. Why minor sad? Sign H. They like sad tail at end. P. P. S. La la la ree. I feel so sad today. La ree. So lonely. Dee” (U 230). Bloom’s thoughts are also concerned with the process of writing, especially his use of the Greek “e” instead of a regular “e” to help disguise his handwriting: “Remember write Greek ees.” “Underline imposs.” “No, change that ee.” “Greek ee. Better add postscript” (U 229-230). In “Sirens,” composition is seamlessly integrated into Bloom’s other mental processes.

The “Cyclops” chapter contains another letter whose content is included in the novel and whose text is woven into descriptions of the environment. In Barney Kiernan’s pub the regulars, including the un-named narrator and the Citizen, are discussing a hanging that is to take place. Alf Bergan, another Dubliner, produces a couple of letters

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8 During his epistolary affair with Martha Fleischmann, Joyce chose to use Greek e’s in his letters to her—a moment where his life replicated his art.
for people who are applying for the position of hangman. Although the letter is reprinted in the text of Ulysses, the very text itself contains interjections from the rowdy men in the pub and the third person narrator.

7 Hunter Street, 
Liverpool.

To the High Sheriff of Dublin, 
Dublin.

Honoured sir i beg to offer my services in the abovementioned painful case i hanged Joe Gann in Bootle jail on the 12 of February 1900 and i hanged .... 
—Show us, Joe, says I. 
—...private Arthur Chace for fowl murder of Jessie Tilsit in Pentonville prison and i was assistant when ... 
—Jesus, says I. 
—Billington executed the awful murder Toad Smith ... 
The citizen made a grab at the letter. 
—Hold hard, says Joe, i have a special nack of putting the noose once in he can’t get out hoping to be favoured i remain, honoured sir, my terms is five ginnees.

H. Rumbold
Master Barber (U 249)

Rumbold’s letter is not free from interruptions. External readers seem to be looking over the shoulder of Joe Hynes who is reading the letter out loud to his comrades, but this letter is full of spoken interjections. The voices of the men in the bar and the voice of the narrator actually appear to violate the physical form of the letter, creating an interesting space where the visual and the auditory combine. Rumbold’s letter sharply

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9 Alf Bergan is based on a real person of the exact same name who was friends with Joyce’s father. He was even a witness to John Joyce’s will. In 1904, Bergan was also a sub-sheriff of Dublin, and his memories of that position might have been the inspiration for this letter (Fargnoli and Gillespie 17). 
10 One of the sources for H. Rumbold was almost assuredly Sir Horace Rumbold, who was a British Minister in Bern, Switzerland. While in Zurich, Joyce was involved in a lawsuit with former members of his performing arts group, The English Players, and Rumbold, the judge in the case, ruled against him (Patten 110). As Patten suggests in his article “‘Psych-lops?’: H. Rumbold, Master Barber,” the source for H. Rumbold could have also come from Richard Rumbold, who served under Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War and who stood guard as Charles I was executed. He also only had one eye (Patten 110-11)
contrasts with the interludes in this section that parody formal writing styles like wedding announcements, scientific findings, and popular literature. And since he is English, this letter only continues to build up the anger and resentment towards the English that has already saturated the pub. Alf Bergan says of the hangmen who have written him:

“They’re all barbers, says he, from the black country that would hang their own fathers for five quid down and traveling expenses” (U 250).

Included letters in Ulysses are Joyce’s investigations into the ways that written language, either purposefully or accidentally, fail to accurately represent human consciousness. In Rumbold’s letter, Joyce is experimenting with the ways subjectivity can attempt to be presented when the letter writer does not have a strong control of language. Rumbold’s application letter shows that he is striving for a literacy he cannot pull off. His letter is full of mistakes that make it hard to read, such as lack of proper spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. The lack of unity in the letter comes from Rumbold’s juxtaposition of traditional epistolary language such as “Honoured sir i beg to offer my services” and “hoping to be favoured i remain,” with the informal nature of his other writing and the graphic nature of his job: “i have a special nack of putting the noose once in he can’t get out.” Because of his inability to write well, the ideas that Rumbold is trying to get across in the letter become convoluted. That said, Rumbold’s letter exposes his lack of education and his socio-economic class, thus adding to his character function as a character narrator.11

11 Rumbold’s lower class status and unrefined writing are later parodied in an episode in “Cyclops” which presents a romanticized account of the execution of a revolutionary, written in the style of popular novels and journalism of the time: “Quietly, unassumingly, Rumbold stepped on to the scaffold in faultless morning dress and wearing his favourite flower the Gladiolus Cruentus. He announced his presence by that gentle Rumboldian cough which so many have tried (unsuccessfully) to imitate - short, painstaking yet
While Rumbold’s struggles with language inadvertently present problems representing the thoughts he wants to articulate, Milly Bloom, Leopold’s daughter, deliberately leaves information out of her letter to her father, like other female letter writers in modernist fiction, presenting an incomplete picture of her internal state. In the morning post that Bloom picks up is a letter from Milly who is in Mullingar, a town in Eastern Ireland, in order to learn photography for the summer.\(^{12}\) It reads:

Dearest Papli,

Thanks ever so much for the lovely birthday present. It suits me splendid. Everyone says I am quite the belle in my new tam. I got mummy’s lovely box of creams and am writing. They are lovely. I am getting on swimming in the photo business now. Mr Coghlan took one of me and Mrs. Will send when developed. We did great biz yesterday. Fair day and all the beef to the heels were in.\(^{13}\) We are going to lough Owel on Monday with a few friends for a scrap picnic. Give my love to mummy and to yourself a big kiss and thanks. I hear them at the piano downstairs. There is to be a concert in the Greville Arms on Saturday. There is a young student comes here sometimes named Bannon his cousins or something are big swells and he sings Boylan’s (I was on the pop of writing Blazes Boylan’s) song about those seaside girls. Tell him silly Milly sends my best respects. I must now close with fondest love

Your fond daughter

Milly

\(^{12}\) Critics have often speculated why Milly is sent to Mullingar to learn photography instead of attending one of the Dublin academies to learn typing. One of the most vulgar explanations for her exile from the Bloom household is that there is a threat of incest at home or that incest has already taken place. For more on incest in Ulysses, see Jane Ford’s article “Why is Milly in Mullingar?”

\(^{13}\) “The fame of the fine beasts to be seen at the Mullingar marts spawned the popular Irish phrase ‘beef to the heels like a Mullingar heifer’ (an unkind remark about ladies with less than slender ankles).” (Mullingar)
Milly’s letter gives readers of *Ulysses* an opportunity to, in a sense, hear Milly’s voice and get a glimpse of her internal state at the time of writing the letter. In her letter, Milly comes off as affectionate, because she addresses her father by his nickname, “Papli;” young, because she uses a considerable amount of slang in her letter, with terms like “swimming,” “biz,” “beef to the heels,” “scrap picnic,” and “big swells;” and excited about her experiences. She describes the people she has met and even what is going on around her while she is writing, adopting Richardson’s “writing to the minute” style. The letter also reveals a lot about Milly’s psychological state. The tone and style of the letter suggests that she hears her friends downstairs and wants to hang out with them instead of writing an obligatory note to her parents. The sentences in the letter are extremely short, almost like a telegram, similar to Stephen’s journal entries at the end of *A Portrait*: “Mr Coghlan took one of me and Mrs. Will send when developed.” She thanks her father for the present, and as customary, tries to show how much she has liked the gifts she received from Bloom and Molly, but she calls the box of creams “lovely” twice in a row, almost as if she needed filler, words to take up space. The letter ends with a P.S., because before closing, Milly seems to feel the need to make excuses for the quality of her writing, as if she felt guilty about her letter, although it is not clear from the

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14 Milly and Martha’s letters, which will be discussed later, are unique in that they are the only texts in *Ulysses* untouched by the narrator and other characters. Benstock notes, “What distinguishes letters from Milly and Martha is their appearance as full texts which look like what they are. These messages assume a different textual status from the narration that encloses them; they are distinct from other kinds of verbal communication which surround them (spoken dialogue or internal monologue) and recognizably different from other kinds of written messages, such as newspaper headlines, billboard notices, and advertisements, which are also incorporated into the narrative” (419).
reproduction of the letter that we have in the text (since it is printed and not handwritten) if the “bad writing,” similar to Rumbold’s letter, refers to grammar and syntax or to illegible handwriting (Benstock 417).

Milly also makes significant rhetorical choices about what she decides to write in her letter. She includes just enough information about her daily activities so that her parents will not worry, because she tells them that her job is going well, and she seems to be on good terms with her employers. She has also made lots of friends in Mullingar, as is indicated by the “we,” so she’s not lonely, but she does not give any specific descriptions of who she has met. Bannon, a young student, is briefly mentioned in her letter, but his singing ability is all Milly will talk about, and she is quick to change the topic from Bannon to Blazes Boylan, Molly Bloom’s lover.

This letter is one of the main ways Milly Bloom’s character is presented in Ulysses, so it is used in a fairly traditional way, for although Milly is an important character in the book, and is present especially in her parents’ memories, this is the only time when readers are presented with her voice and her character. The language, tone, and tension in the writing is consistent with what information is given about Milly later, and it seems to be an accurate portrayal of a 15 year old girl away from home for the first time. As Shari Benstock notes in her article, “What we know of [Milly’s] voice, of its component vocabulary, speech patterns and syntax, we know from this letter. This voice establishes an identity for Milly, recalled to us every time her father remembers portions of the letter” (417). However, other events, scenes, and conversations in the text reveal that Milly has omitted a couple of key pieces of information in her thank you note. For example, it is not clear from the letter why Milly addressed her father as “Papli” instead
of something more traditional like “Papa.” The narrator’s description of Bloom’s drawer contents in “Ithaca,” gives more information about this nickname: “A Vere Foster's handwriting copybook, property of Milly (Millicent) Bloom, certain pages of which bore diagram drawings marked Papli, which showed a large globular head with 5 hairs erect, 2 eyes in profile, the trunk full front with 3 large buttons, 1 triangular foot” (U 592). This book suggests that Milly called her father this name since she was a child, and the fact that she drew him implies that they had a close relationship. In “Oxen of the Sun,” Bannon, the student that Milly mentions in her letter, drinks with Stephen and Mulligan at the maternity hospital, and he talks about a girl he has met, who is probably Milly Bloom, suggesting that the two are interested in each other and have the potential to be more than friends.15 These simple omissions question the idea that letters faithfully record characters’ thoughts, because Milly seems to be manipulating some of the information in her thank you note to hide things from her father.

Joyce’s exploitation of the gaps between subjectivity and language is taken to the extreme in Martha Clifford’s letter to Bloom in “Lotus Eaters.” In this piece of correspondence, Joyce is able to create a letter where the writer does not appear to have a coherent consciousness, using the epistolary form in a radical new way. After taking a leisurely walk on John Rogerson’s quay, Bloom goes to the post office and picks up a letter addressed to Henry Flower Esq., C/o P.O. Westland Row, City (U 59). The following letter, mailed with a pressed flower, reveals that Bloom has been carrying on

15 Bannon is not exactly respectful of Milly, however. He describes her as a “skittish heifer, big of her age and beef to the heel,” ironically using the same derogatory term to talk about her as she used to talk about the women in Mullingar (U 325).
some illicit and erotic correspondence under the name of Henry Flower with a woman named Martha Clifford.¹⁶

Dear Henry

I got your last letter to me and thank you very much for it. I am sorry you did not like my last letter. Why did you enclose the stamps? I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that. I called you a naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy? I do wish I could do something for you. Please tell me what you think of poor me. I often think of the beautiful name you have. Dear Henry, when will we meet? I think of you so often you have no idea. I have never felt so much drawn to a man as you. I feel so bad about. Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not wrote. O how I long to meet you. Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are exhausted. Then I will tell you all. Goodbye now, naughty darling, I have such a bad headache. Today. And write by return to your longing.

Martha

P.S. Do tell me what kind of perfume does your wife use. I want to know.

X X X X (U 63-64)

Martha’s letter is very different from Milly’s and Rumbold’s. In her article, “The Printed Letters of Ulysses,” Shari Benstock is able to put into more concrete terms what is so odd, or in her words “troubling,” about Martha’s writing. Martha’s authorial voice undergoes several radical tone shifts in the course of the letter, which Benstock classifies as the following: 1) business prose: “I got your last letter to me and thank you very

¹⁶ Some clues in the text reveal how this illicit relationship got started. While passing the Irish Times, Bloom thinks of what is presumably a personal advertisement reading: “Wanted smart lady typist to aid gentleman in literary work” (U 326). His next thought, a line almost exactly like one from Martha’s letter, suggests that he started his correspondence with Martha by advertising in the newspaper, and that Martha, the “smart lady typist” answered his ad (U 131). In addition, all of Martha’s letters to Bloom are typewritten (U 592). Shari Benstock thinks that Martha is a typist and speculates that some of her mistakes in the letter (especially the transposition of “world” for “word”) could occur because of her profession (418). I think that Martha’s job could explain the grammatical mistakes and unfinished sentences in the letter as well. If Martha is a typist, she is writing her letters to Bloom at work, and therefore secretly and quickly. She would not have the time or resources to read them over and correct any errors she has made.
much”; 2) chastisement: “I am awfully angry at you. I do wish I could punish you for that”; 3) sympathetic pleading: “Please tell me what is the real meaning of the word. Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy”; 4) sexual ploys: “I have never felt myself so much drawn to as you”; 5) threatened retribution: “Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not wrote”; 6) promised and stated confessions: “Then I will tell all” and “I have such a bad headache today”; 7) requests: “Do tell me what type of perfume does your wife use” (Benstock 418-419)

These tone shifts, taken in conjunction with the language—the particular words and phrases used throughout the letter—suggest different stereotypes of women created by the dominant male culture. For example, the business-like tone of the letter combined with the polite “thank you very much” suggests something a young female office worker would write; the chastising voice and the “I do wish I could punish you for that” is characteristic of a dominatrix. David Crystal labels this phenomenon “linguistic stereotypes,” in his work, “Objective and Subjective in Stylistic Analysis.” Crystal defines a stereotype as “an individual or groups’ conventionally held, reductive, mental picture of some aspect of reality; it corresponds in some respects to the reality of an event, but exaggerates, distorts, or ignores, others” (107). A linguistic stereotype, then, is a conventionally held idea about the type of language a certain group uses, regardless of whether or not the people in that group use that language. For example, a linguistic stereotype of lawyers or other people who use legal English would need to, according to Crystal, “introduce certain features that [one] felt were characteristic of lawyers speaking
or writing (e.g. ‘notwithstanding,’ ‘hereinbefore,’ ‘the aforesaid gentleman’), and this would probably be enough to get [one’s] reference recognized as such” (107).

What is so “troubling” or interesting about Martha’s letter is the radical shifts between different female linguistic stereotypes. I’ve already mentioned that Martha’s letter contains language that suggests the female stereotype of a female office worker and a dominatrix, but there are more linguistic stereotypes in her letter. For example, the sentences “Please tell me what is the real meaning of the word. Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?” is the sort of language that a prostitute would use. Such phrases as “I have never felt myself so much drawn to a man as you” calls to mind the stereotype of an innocent virgin. And lastly, “I have such a bad headache today” and “Do tell me what type of perfume does your wife use. I want to know” is the language of a demanding housewife. Martha never writes in one single tone or with one type of language; her letter is extremely polyvocal.

As Martha uses the linguistic stereotypes of several different types of women, she in some sense gives a linguistic or written “performance” of each of these different types. Like an actress on a stage, or more appropriately, an author writing a text, Martha becomes a working girl, a dominatrix, a virgin, a whore, and a demanding woman just by being able to mimic different linguistic stereotypes when she writes. As Brook Thomas notes in his article “Reading and Writing in Joyce’s Dublin”: “The fact that a reader can never know the writer’s identity with certainty allows the writer to say things and adopt roles that he [sic] would never do in person” (76). What Martha does when she writes, then, is to create a multi-dimensional picture of herself which completely conceals her internal state. At a literal level, she writes this way to prevent Bloom from discovering
anything about her. Bloom is completely confused after reading Martha’s letter, because no clear picture of her character emerges. It seems that he even can sense the many voices in the text when he asks himself: “Wonder did she wrote it herself” (U 64). In fact, Martha’s letter is such a radical use of the included letter form because it prevents external readers as well as the character reader from making any sort of generalizations about her—the letter completely hides her identity and allows her to present an incoherent consciousness. If we think about Martha’s letter using Phelan’s terms of character narration, her letter seems to have no telling function or no disclosure function, because no clear message is being given to either Bloom or to the flesh and blood audience. In addition, Martha’s lack of physicality or solidity in the text continues to add to the ephemeral nature of her character presented in the letter. She is a cipher in Ulysses; as Shari Benstock notes “nor are there outside [Martha’s] letter a Martha Clifford or other persons to reinforce an extra-textual ‘character.’”

While Rumbold’s, Milly’s, and Martha’s letters are included in the text so external readers of the novel can see them as well, other pieces of mail in Ulysses are deliberately shielded from the external reader’s eyes, interrogating the reader element of

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17 In “The Unveiling of Martha Clifford,” Michael H. Begnal tries to pin down Martha’s identity. Rejecting the logical theory that Martha has no secret identity, he tries to prove that every major female character in the text is Martha. After all of his theories fall flat, he uses algebra and scant evidence to argue that Ignatius Gallaher, of “A Little Cloud” is really Martha Clifford, and this false correspondence with Bloom is a way to get him back into the world of Dublin journalism.

18 Martha does briefly appear, however, in the “Circe” chapter of Ulysses, when Bloom’s subconscious desires become as real to himself and to the reader as the every day events of his waking life. Bloom has followed Stephen to Nighttown, which is the red-light district of Dublin, and as he searches for the young student, he comes face to face with the manifestation of the guilt he has felt throughout the day. Two watchmen appear and begin to interrogate Bloom. Although when asked for his name and address, Bloom pretends to be “Dr. Bloom, Leopold, dental surgeon . . .von Blum Pasha” a well known dentist, the card that falls from his hat identifies him as Henry Flower, the pseudonym he has been using in his affair of letters with Martha (U 371). Bloom quickly makes excuses for himself and explains that he and the young lady in question are engaged to be married, but then Martha herself appears, although her face is veiled and cannot be seen, begging Bloom to clear her name.
the epistolary tradition. In “Lestrygonians,” Dennis Breen receives a postcard in the mail with an enigmatic message that agitates his already unstable state of mind. There is no clue who sent it (although Bloom thinks that is it either Alf Bergan or Richie Goulding) and only a few words are written on it:

—What is it? Mr Bloom asked, taking the card. U.P.?
—U.p: up she said. Someone taking a rise out of him. It’s a great shame for them whoever he is. (U 130)

There has been endless speculation by critics as to what the “U.p: up” postcard means. In Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist, an apothecary’s apprentice uses the term U.P. to announce that an older woman has died (Gifford 163). Another conjecture is that the phrase originates in Irish cemeteries and has something to do with the initials that come before the docket numbers (Gifford 163). “UP” could also be a take off of the Anglo-Irish phrase “It’s all up with you,” which is close to the American phrase, “It’s all washed up” (Kershner 407). This idea is echoed in the French translation of Ulysses, which Joyce collaborated on, where “U.p: up” is translated to fou tu, or “you’re nuts” (Gifford 163). “Underproof” is the term for whiskey below a legal standard, and “U.p” could be an abbreviation of that designation, implying that (to use another alcoholic idiom,) Breen is “one can short of a six pack” (Byrnes 175-6). On a political note, UP could stand for “Ulster protestant,” and Breen is insulted at being labeled an Anglo-Irishman (Kershner 407). Or conversely, in the late eighteenth century, the word “up” was associated with Irish Revolutionaries, specifically a group called the United Irishman, who included

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19 Another letter that is not shown to the reader in the text is Boylan’s note to “Mrs. Marion Bloom” which would be an “ill-mannered mode of address to a married woman living with her husband” (Gifford 76). This note from Boylan to Molly is just one example in the text of how letters are an important part of relationships in Ulysses. They can be a space to voice erotic desires, are used as a substitute for sex, but are also portrayed as an important part of falling in love.
Robert Emmet, the same man Bloom thinks about in “Sirens” as he is about to fart (Bauerle 117). The term “UP” could also be an attack on Breen’s masculinity. It could imply that he is impotent, that he can’t “get it up.” Or he can get it up, but “When erect you urinate instead of ejaculate” (Gifford 163). Saying “U” and “P” out loud (“you pee”) reinforces this meaning (Kershner 408). None of the characters who read the letter, question the message on the postcard, and most of them suspect that it is an allusion to the fact that Breen is slowly going crazy, but readers of the book who are not familiar with turn of the century Dublin slang never find out what UP means (Brynes 175).

In addition, because the author of this postcard is unknown, it flouts traditional etiquette. From 1900-1918, people in the United Kingdom frequently exchanged postcards. The custom was that you would receive a card and then send it back to the person who sent it to you. As mentioned earlier, Beth Hewitt in Correspondence in American Literature labels this kind of exchange “reciprocity” and compares it to an almost legal obligation (6). An anonymous postcard is insulting to its recipient.²⁰ The public nature of postcards, which are not in envelopes like letters, further exposes Breen’s insult (Clissold).

This postcard flouts traditional uses of letters in novels that provide important information, because it deliberately shields information from external readers and inserts an unsolvable puzzle in the text.²¹ In the reader element of the epistolary tradition, letters

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²⁰ Sending anonymous letters in both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake is also considered to be an insulting act, and even a crime. In the Wake, ALP accuses Sully, considered by some as the book’s villain, of being a “wreuter of the annoyingmost letters” (FW 495.2). In “Circe,” when Bloom is on trial, one of the earliest charges brought against him by a Mrs. Yelverton Berry is that he “wrote me an anonymous letter in prentice backhand” (U 379)

²¹ Bradley Clissold echoes this sentiment in his talk, “The ‘U.P.:up’ Postcard: Why it Continues to Matter” when he notes that the UP postcard subverts a Victorian plot device (Clissold)
are spaces where the disclosure function and the narrator function united, providing information to both characters and readers. Here, the characters know what is on the postcard, and talk on several occasions about what it might mean, but readers of *Ulysses* never see the written text as it appears on the card. Our only understanding of it is what we hear from their conversations. So it is unclear if the card says, “up,” or “UP,” or “U.P.” or if the characters are saying the word “up” because they are just reading the letters. Or is the word “up” on the postcard? Does it read verbatim what Josie Breen says “U.p: up?” This moment of epistolarity does not have a disclosure function; like Helen’s letters in the first chapter of *Howards End*, the letter is used to communicate between characters, not to easily communicate information to readers. This piece of mail is almost the antithesis of the traditional included letter form, because the reader is actually never shown the written word; the text is not changed to look like a letter, the spoken word is the only evidence of what is on the postcard.22

Martha Clifford’s letter to Bloom in *Ulysses* completely rejects the character element of the epistolary tradition because it shows the ways language completely fails to represent a single character’s consciousness. But after exhausting the epistolary form’s relationship to subjectivity, Joyce continues to use the letter in *Ulysses* to parody the relationship between letters (and postcards) and implied readers. Joyce takes the epistolary form in new directions in this third novel, but unlike the modernist authors in Chapter 2, reunites the letter with its eighteenth-century origins. In *Howards End*, Jacob’s *Room*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, female letter writers deliberately

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22 Another postcard in *Ulysses* does not even have a message. The postcard the sailor shows Bloom and Stephen in “Eumaeus” only contains the addresses of the recipient. The narrator says of Bloom, “There was no message evidently, as he took particular note” (U 512). Also the name on the postcard, “A Boudin” is different than the name the sailor introduces himself as “DB Murphy” (U 512; U 512).
omitted the topics of sex and love from their letters, divorcing the epistolary form from its associations with transgressive female sexuality. Martha’s letter, on the other hand, challenges patriarchal power structures, reconnecting the epistolary form to one of its primary associations in the eighteenth, and even nineteenth, centuries. Although initially Martha’s linguistic performance in her letter seems to reinforce the stereotypes of women created by the dominant ideology, according to Judith Butler, the performative nature of gender presents an opportunity for subversion, so performance can also give woman a mode of resistance to that same ideology. In her article, “Pretending in Penelope,” Kimberly Devlin makes a distinction between two different types of female performance: female masquerade, a term first introduced by Joan Riviere, and female mimicry, first introduced by Carole-Ann Tyler. Devlin says, “on one hand [in female masquerade] women may assume and internalize . . . culturally determined images passively and unconsciously; but on the other hand [in female mimicry] they can appropriate them ironically, manipulate them from an internal critical distance” (81). Devlin argues that when Molly Bloom performs the dominatrix in *Venus in Furs*, the defensive housewife, the femme fatale, and the shameless adulteress (just to name a few), she practices female mimicry by using these different constructions of womanliness to give her “a tentative, albeit unstable critical vantage on various cultural institutions” (99). Although she writes in the language of the dominant culture, Martha’s continual shift between different female linguistic stereotypes is a type of female mimicry as well. She is not solely a lady typist, solely a dominatrix, or solely a virgin—she can be all of these things. For example, the stereotype of a dominatrix is a one-dimensional character, an anonymous icon with a completely stable identity who can only speak in the linguistic stereotype of
the dominatrix. Martha’s many voices, however, prevent her from being pigeonholed into one stereotypic category of woman. Since language is one of the mechanisms that stereotype or fix women’s identity, Martha’s written performance, which prevents a unified representation of her character, resists the apparatus that the patriarchal institution uses to create different constructs of womanliness and gives her a liminal, protean identity that demonstrates how limiting, incomplete, and artificial stereotypes are.

Other letters in Ulysses are also not afraid to discuss sex and love. Martha Clifford’s letter is also an example of how letters can contain erotic language. As mentioned previously in the chapter, her tones of “chastisement,” “sexual ploys” and “threatened retribution” are tones that are associated with sex, and because of her language, she performs both dominatrix and whore in her letter. But because it is so polyvocal, her letter is not, in general, very sexual. Bloom’s reaction to it demonstrates that he is looking for something more in her letters than just an epistolary relationship. As he re-reads her letter again, he inserts flower names with sexual undertones in certain sections of the letter to make it more erotic than it previously was: “Angry tulips with you darling manflower punish your cactus if you don’t please poor forgetmenot how I long violets to dear roses when we soon anemone meet all naughty nightstalk wife Martha’s perfume” (U 64). But Bloom notes a change in Martha’s writing. The letters in his drawer in “Ithaca” reveal that they have exchanged a least a few letters, and his reflections on her latest letter show he is intent on pushing to her write in a more sexually charged language: “Go further next time. Naughty boy: punish: afraid of words, of course. Brutal, why not? Try it anyhow. A bit at a time”(U 64). Molly’s memories in “Penelope” present an idea about what Bloom hopes his relationship with Martha will
become. Later on in their courtship, Bloom would write letters to Molly that were so erotic that she masturbated to them several times a day, even though she was aware that Bloom had copied some of the language in them from a letter writing manual. So in Ulysses, the letter moves from just being a space that can voice erotic desires to an object that becomes part of the sexual act.

Although letters in Ulysses are associated with sex, they are also portrayed as being an important part of forming a romantic relationship. In “Penelope” Molly muses on this aspect of letter writing. She understands the connections that letters can create between individuals and expresses it by hoping a letter will arrive and remembering that she used to send herself things in the mail. Molly appreciates how important letters are to couples and talks about her own rhetorical strategies when writing and helping her friends write: “I could write the answer in bed to let him imagine me short just a few words not those long crossed letters Atty Dillon used to write to the fellow that was something in the four courts that jilted her after out of the ladies letterwriter when I told her to say a few simple words he could twist how he liked” (U 624). Molly is familiar with the unique position of a letter writer. Because a letter can be a material representation of a character’s thoughts, letter writers occupy a unique space between presence and absence (Hewitt 2). Molly uses the language of a letter then to help the letter reader imagine the absent lover, but not reveal too much about the letter writer,

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23 Joyce was convinced that one of the first letters that Nora wrote to him was from a letter-writing manual. For more information, see Eloise Knowlton’s “Joyce and the Stakes of Style: Or, The Case of the Copied Letter.”

24 Molly also understands, however, that letters can contain false sentiments. She hopes that Boylan at least writes that he loves her, even though it might not be true, just because of how it would make her feel: “if he wrote it I suppose thered be some truth in it true or no it fills up your whole day and life always something to think about every moment and see it all around you like a new world” (U 624)

25 Molly’s description of what a letter to a man should be like sounds similar to a description of what Martha’s letter is like.
making the reader want to know more. Molly hopes that Boylan will send her a letter, although she does not seem very satisfied with the one that he wrote in the morning and yearns for a love letter, not just a note. This is one area where Bloom has beaten his rivals: not only did Molly masturbate to his letters, but considered them, along with his doing things like sending her flowers for her birthday, an essential part of falling in love: “writing a letter every morning sometimes twice a day I liked the way he made love then he knew the way to take a woman” (U 624).

This aspect of letters in the text has strong connections to Joyce’s personal use of letters. It is well known that Joyce and his wife Nora, during their separation in 1909, wrote erotic letters to each other. As Richard Ellmann notes in his article “Publishing Joyce’s Letters to His Wife,” where he defends his decision to publish this illicit correspondence, the letters “were deliberate fantasies, intended to accomplish sexual gratification in [Joyce] and the same in his wife” (584). But often the more spiritual aspects of Nora and Joyce’s correspondence are overlooked. As Wendy B. Faris notes in “The Poetics of Marriage: Flowers and Gutter Speech, Joyce’s Letters to Nora,” “There are . . . certain points in the love letters where Joyce concentrates exclusively on the spiritual side of his love, and other where he glories in lust” (10). Joyce’s letters to his wife become part of the sexual act: “My sweet little whorish Nora I did as you told me, you dirty little girl, and pulled myself off twice when I read your letter” (SL 184). But Joyce also expresses his love to his wife in these letters and celebrates the connection he has with her, and although he sometimes also uses conventional language about love to do so, his words are still very genuine and moving: “Anyhow, Nora, I love you. I cannot live without you. I would like to give you everything that is mine. . . I would like to go
through life side by side with you, telling you more and more until we grow to be one
being together until the hour should come for use to die” (SL 175). Like the letter from
Gabriel to Gretta in “The Dead” Joyce drew from his own personal experience as a letter
writer to create an erotic and passionate exchange of messages in his art. 26

**Finnegans Wake**

Joyce worked on his last work, *Finnegans Wake*, for 17 years, from 1922 to 1939.
While *Ulysses* was a book of the day, *Finnegans Wake* was a book about the night and
dreams. In his last work, Joyce moves away from questions of subjectivity and begins to
investigate questions of language and reality. This can be seen in both the language and
the characters. Wakean characters are protean and sometimes as illogical as the workings
of the subconscious; they are more like archetypes and mythical beings than real people.
The language of the text is not ordinary English, because the book is filled with puns and
portmanteau words that make use of over 40 languages. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce’s
experiments with the epistolary form probe the gaps between language and narrative, and
eventually, between language and reality. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce specifically
challenges the coherence parameter of the narrative element of the epistolary tradition,
because a crucial letter in the text only frustrates the reader’s effort to pull together major
narrative threads, instead of revealing important information to the reader. Other letters
in *Finnegans Wake* are portrayed in a similar vein, as they are unable to distribute or
preserve information, questioning traditional ideas about the letter as an object. As in

26 Faris notes the similarities between characters in Joyce’s fictions, (both Stephen Dedalus and Leopold
Bloom reveal in the spiritual and sexual side of women) but not how the letters in his fiction mirror the
letters in his life (12).
Ulysses, letters from female writers provide alternative narratives that challenge patriarchal power structures, but the Wake also questions the ability of language to affect events in reality. The footnotes in Book II, Chapter 2 during a specific discussion of letters undermine the idea that language influences social and political movements. In addition, Joyce takes the relationship between the letter and literature to a new level by directly conflating the epistolary form and the novel.

One of the main narrative threads in Finnegans Wake is that the male protagonist, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (or HCE) has committed some sort of disturbing crime, the nature of which is never fully explained. Whatever the offense is, it took place in Phoenix Park in Dublin; it seems to have involved two girls (perhaps prostitutes) and three British soldiers; and HCE may have exposed himself to some or all of these characters. This crime is the closest thing to plot in Finnegans Wake as the characters in and readers of the Wake yearn to know if HCE is guilty of the accusations against him. Much of the evidence about the crime points to HCE’s guilt, but there is supposedly a letter written by his wife, Anna Livia Plurabelle (or ALP), that proclaims his innocence. The descriptions of the letter, which appears at the end of the book, imply that it will impact and clarify an important storyline.

In Book I, Chapter 3 of the Wake, an anonymous commentator explores how word of HCE’s crime spreads among the citizens of Dublin and asks:

... Will it ever be next morning the postal unionist's (officially called carrier's, Letters Scotch, Limited) strange fate (Fierceendgiddyex he's hight, d.e., the losel that hucks around missivemaids' gummibacks) to hand in a huge

27 Anytime the letters “H,” “C,” and “E” appear together in the text, they reference the character HCE.
chain envelope, written in seven divers stages of ink, from blanchessance to lavandaiette, every pothook and pancrook bespeaking the wisherwife, superscribed and subpencilled by yours A Laughable Party, with afterwite, S.A.G., to Hyde and Cheek, Edenberry, Dubblenn, WC? (FW 66.10-18)

This letter or “chain envelope” is described as being written in “seven divers stages of ink” (FW 66.13). The handwriting of the letter, “Every pothook [a stroke made in writing],” the fact that the letter is from “blanchessance” and “lavandiaette” [corruptions of the French word for “laundry” and “washerwoman”], and the signature “A Laughable Party” imply that the writer of the letter is ALP, who does laundry for a living (McHugh 66).28 The letter is to “Hyde and Cheek, Edenberry,” or HCE and is found in a dump by a hen29: “till Cox's wife, twice Mrs Hahn [German for rooster], pokes her beak into the matter” (FW 66.23-24).30 Further questions about the letter suggest that the information in it could be illuminating: it might serve as a light in darkness brightening what cannot be seen: “Will it bright upon us, nightle, and we plunging to our plight? Well, it might now, mircle, so it light” (FW 66.21-23).

This mysterious epistle appears again in Book I, Chapter 4. One of the main events in this section is HCE’s trial as he faces the four judges of Ireland: Matthew Gregory, Marcus Lyons, Luke Tarpey, and Johnny MacDougal (also known collectively as Mamalujo). During the trial, Mamalujo and the gallery of the courthouse call for Kate, the maid of the pub that HCE owns, to bring forth a letter. “The solid man” they say will be “saved by his sillied woman” (FW 94.3). At the end of the paragraph about the letter,

28 In this chapter, I rely heavily on Roland McHugh’s Annotations to Finnegans Wake for insight into different words and phrases in the text. McHugh’s book is one of the most, if not the most, comprehensive set of annotations for the Wake in Joyce criticism.
29 This hen’s name is Biddy and she is another important character associated with ALP’s letter.
30 McHugh 66.
there are many references to apples and fruit: “Ah, furchte fruchte, timid Danaides! Ena milo melo-mon, frai is frau and swee is too, swee is two when swoo is free, ana mala woe is we!” (FW 94.14-16). “Furchte fruchte” means “fear fruits,” “Ena milo melon-mon” means “one apple my apple,” and “ana mala” means “bad apple” (McHugh 94). These references connect the letter to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, the archetypical home of the forbidden fruit. The letter, like the apple that Adam and Eve ate, will provide its readers with a certain knowledge that will make them see things differently, that will open their eyes. Likewise, this account references HCE’s transgression in Phoenix park. The “pair of sycopanties” would be the two girls, the “three meddlers” would be the three British soldiers, and the “old obster lumpky pumpkin” is HCE, whose wife refers to him as a “bumpkin” in her final monologue (FW 94.16-18; 627.23).

In Book I, Chapter 5, the letter undergoes literary analysis by a professor, more information about the letter is discovered, and some of its content is even revealed. As the professor praises Biddy the hen, the finder of the letter, one of the fourteen thunder words cracks through the text.31

\[\ldots\text{All schwants (schwrites) ischt tell the cock's trootabout him. Kapak kapuk. No minzies matter. He had to see life foully the plak and the smut, (schwrites). There were three men in him (schwrites). Dancings (schwrites) was his only too feebles. With apple harlottes. And a little mollvogels. Spissially (schwrites) when they peaches. Honeys wore camelia paints. Yours very truthful. Add dapple inn. (FW 113.11-18)}\]

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31 Thunderwords are hundred-letter-long words that appear in the *Wake* and represent the sound of thunder.
Like previous mentions of the letter in Chapters 3 and 4 of Book I, this interruption implies that something has been written HCE from the accusations against him. The “(schwrites)”—the “she who writes”—in this interlude again seems to be ALP because the closing is signed “Yours very truthful. Add dapple inn.” “Add” could be “Ann,” as in Anna Livia Plurabelle, and “dapple in” could be Dublin. All ALP wants is to tell the truth about him, her husband, and perhaps what she writes offers an explanation for why he did what he did—“He had to see life fouly the plak and the smut” or as we might paraphrase this passage: “He had to see life fully, the black and the white, the good and the bad.” As in the description of the letter in Book I, Chapter 3, there seems to be a reference to the crime with the “three men” and “the too feebles. With apple harlottes.” Apples resurface again: “apple harlottes,” is close to apple charlottes, a type of pastry, and “mollvogels” is “small apple” in Albanian, two references which continue to connect this written document to the apple in the Garden of Eden and to some kind of enlightenment (McHugh 113). “Honeys wore camellia paints” is close to “Honi soit qui mal y pense,” or “Shame be to him who evil thinks of this,” suggesting that ALP, the writer, is taking a defensive stance (McHugh 113).

All of these discussions that surface in the novel build up a lot of expectations about the letter, because it is presented in the text as a document that will provide important information. It is depicted as being able to make the storyworld more coherent, as in The Moonstone, by being able to fill in the text’s hermeneutic gap, answering the question, “Did he do it?” When the full text of the letter is revealed in the last book of the Wake, however, it is very different from its earlier manifestations. In his article, “The Last Epistle of Finnegans Wake,” Patrick McCarthy lists some of the differences between
the final letter at the end of the text and its previous versions: the language and punctuation of the final letter are unlike earlier ones; there are no physical descriptions of the final letter, whereas these always accompanied other drafts; and some of the themes in the previous letters take on very different meanings in the final letter (725-33). 32 Regardless, ALP’s final letter contains the traditional linguistic markings of letters that have been used previously. It starts with “Dear,” closes with a signature (“Alma Luvia Pollabella”), and has a postscript (FW 619.1; 619.16-17). Its content is fairly traditional as it opens with a greeting, thanks certain individuals, reflects on past events, gives news about the present, and talks about a funeral and a wake (Campbell and Robinson 353). In Book III, Chapter 3, ALP will proclaim her husband’s innocence out loud to Mamalujo through her son Shaun, but here she makes no move to defend or condemn HCE. There is one mention of the crime in the park: “How delitious for the three Sulvans of Dulkey and what a sellpriceget the two Peris of Monacheena! Sugars of led for the cholars ashpots! Peace!” (FW 616.10-12). In this phrase, the word “delit” is French for crime, and the three and the two again reference the soldiers and the girls (McHugh 616). Nevertheless, this included letter does not pass any judgment on HCE or try to explain his transgressions. This letter does not “bright upon us” or illuminate anything, parodying how letters are used to create coherent stories within the epistolary tradition.

In addition, this letter promises that another piece of mail, a postcard, will arrive and provide the reader with a “full view” of what happens: “Only look through your leatherbox one day with P.C.Q. about 4.32 or at 8 and 22.5 with the quart of scissions

32 McCarthy also lists the reasons why readers should have suspected that the letter would not provide any concrete information. For more see his above mentioned article.
masters and clerk and the benyhum of Marie Reparatrices for a good allround sympowdhericks, purge, full view” (FW 618.12-15). The front of the postcard shows a picture of St. Patrick’s Purge, a tunnel that is supposedly the entrance to Purgatory, and this image symbolizes how ALP’s letter functions in the text (McHugh 619). Instead of contributing information that will fill in gaps in the narrative, it only emphasizes the holes in the story of what took place in Phoenix Park. Like the “UP” postcard in Ulysses, it presents a puzzle that will never be solved. This piece of mail is supposed to come “one day,” meaning that it will not be here soon and implying it will never arrive. To use a Joycean pun to describe ALP’s letter—it does not deliver. This anticipation of new information is one of the reasons that ALP’s letter is so intriguing, precisely because it does not answer any questions about HCE, leaving a gap in one of the prominent storylines. As Tony Thwaites notes in Joycean Temporalities, “What fascinates us is what has not yet been said: not in the sense of a definite but yet undiscovered content, a secret that would finally reveal if seen from just the right angle point of view [‘full view’] or all in good time, but in the far simpler sense of always more” (150).33

33 Other passages in the Wake also call into question the usefulness of letters and their ability to distribute information. At the end of Book I, Chapter 4, Kate, the barmaid, finally presents the letter to the court. When asked “What was it” all that is answered is “A .......... ! / ? ........0!” (FW 94.19-21). Whatever is written in the letter cannot be read or the contents of the letter cannot be put into words. It can only be expressed as letters of the Greek alphabet, particularly the alpha and the omega. Shaun the Post, the mail carrier and son of HCE and ALP, also cannot read the letter and admits as much when he is questioned by the people of Dublin in Book III, Chapter 1. Shaun has just told his audience a story, and although the inquisitors in this section comment on the quality of the tale, they now want to know if he can read the letter about HCE: “But could you, of course, decent Lettrechaun, we knew (to change your name of not your nation) while still in the barrel, read the strangewrote anaglyptics of those shemletters patent for His Christian's Em?” (FW 419.16-19). Shaun replies: “Greek! Hand it to me! (FW 419.20). He adds that he can read things backwards and forwards and understand many different languages, but this letter is very badly written. “It is not a nice production” Shaun says, and dismisses the letter as “flummery” (FW 419.31; 420.1). Shaun’s quick dismissal of a coded or complex text is a comment on how the modernist project is received by the layperson.
The physical nature of the letter, the fact that it is a written record of past events, is why letters in literature are traditionally used to preserve and circulate information as in the object element of the epistolary tradition. But the physical nature of the letter in the *Wake* only makes its message more susceptible to damage and distortion. This is a theme in Book I, Chapter 5 where the letter has been damaged after sitting in the trash. Comparing the letter to a horse, the professor who narrates this section says:

> Well, almost any photoist worth his chemicots will tip anyone asking him the teaser that if a negative of a horse happens to melt enough while drying, well, what you do get is, well, a positively grotesquely distorted macromass of all sorts of horsehappy values and masses of meltwhile horse. Tip. Well, this freely is what must have occurred to our missive. (*FW* 111.26-30)

The letter has become so affected by the garbage that its message is distorted, which could be why no one can read it. Later in this section, the professor notes that the letter has been mutilated, making the parts that were clear unclear. Several “paper wounds” were made in the document, both signifying the crucifixion of Christ and the violence done to a text by critical interpretation (*FW* 124.3). Initially it appears that another professor poked the missive with a fork, but the “quadrifoil jab was more recurrent wherever the script was clear and the term terse and that these two were the selfsame spots naturally selected for her perforations by Dame Partlet on her dungheap” (*FW* 124.20-24).³⁴ It becomes evident that as she discovered the letter, Biddy the Hen actually destroyed parts of it—parts that were particularly easy to understand. In the *Wake*, then, the physical nature of the letter makes it vulnerable to outside forces, and the information contained in letters is easily destroyed.

³⁴ These seem like the “terrible prongs” that ALP fears in her final monologue (*FW* 628).
Further comments on ALP’s letter suggest that it never reached its destination and was, in fact, lost. The lost or hidden letter is another common trope in fiction, as in The Moonstone and “The Purloined Letter,” but letters in the Wake that are lost are not recovered—an idea present in the first description of the letter in Book I, Chapter 3, where the letter is portrayed not as being sent on its way. Instead, it is lying dormant in a mailbox waiting for a delivery that will never take place: “will this kiribis pouch filled with litterish fragments lurk dormant in the paunch of that halpbrother of a herm a pillbox [mailbox]? (FW 66.23-27). In Book III, Chapter 1, the notes the different mail carriers have made on the envelope of the letter imply that its delivery has not been successful. “Not known at 1132;” “No such no;” “Place scent on;” “Drowned in the Laffey;” “Back in Few Minutes;” “Caught. Missing. Justiciated;” “Kainly forewarred;” “Back to the P.O.;” and lastly “Came Baked to Auld Aireen. Stop” (FW 420.23; 420.25; 420.30; 420.34; 421.3; 420.5; 420.7; 420.14). The most important document in the text never seems to reach its intended destination.

In addition, the whole postal system in Finnegans Wake, traditionally a bastion of reliability in the United Kingdom, is on the verge of breaking down. In Book III, Chapter 1, Shaun threatens to stop delivering the mail. The people want to give him the title of postmaster general, but instead he rejects it and wants to retire. “Yet I cannot on my solemn merits as a recitativer recollect ever having done of anything of the kind to deserve of such Not the phost of a nation! Nor by a long trollop! I just didn't have the time to” (FW 409.4-7). The people ask him “who will bear these open letter,” but Shaun dodges the question by musing on his new potential careers (FW 410.22).

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35 McHugh 66.
Shaun’s refusal to deliver the mail threatens one of the most stable and dependable institutions in the British Empire, and this parallels the way his sister Issy’s letter threatens the patriarchal authority of their father. As in Ulysses, letters and letter writing in Finnegans Wake often voice a subversive feminine sexuality, such as the letter originally did in the eighteenth century. The other two included letters in Finnegans Wake are in Book II, Chapter 2 and are written by Issy. One letter is in the main text and appears to be a copy of ALP’s letter, but the other is in the footnotes and is the longest footnote in the section.

In contrast to her twin brothers, Shem and Shaun, Issy is associated with writing and language. As the two boys, “jemmijohns,” argue about arithmetic and division tables, Issy sits and knits on the sofa, because for her the “stew of the evening” is “booksyful” (FW 268.7; 287.14-15). Writing and reading come naturally to Issy because knowledge of these subjects has been passed down from older generations of women in her family: “From gramma’s grammar she has it that if there is a third person, mascarine, phelinine or nuder” (FW 268.16-17). Issy’s grandmother not only teaches her about grammar, but gives her advice about dealing with men. Some of it concerns finding a good one: “It’s a wild’s kitten my deal, who can tell a wilkling [ram] from a warthog. For you may be as practical as is predicable but you must have the proper sort of accident to meet that kind of being with a difference” (FW 269.12-15). Different passages in the grandmother’s discussion, on the other hand, imply that women are in positions of power and control.

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36 McHugh 269.
relationships: “I am a quean. Is a game over? The game goes on” (FW 269.21-22).

Women are queens, and love “the commonknoonest thing” is a game that can easily start or end (FW 269.26).

This theme of powerful, subversive female sexuality and its connection with writing is important for understanding Issy’s footnote on page 279. In her article, “Issy’s Footnote,” Jen Shelton makes persuasive arguments that help decode this confusing section; however, it is first necessary to clarify that this footnote is a letter, since it does not appear to have any epistolary markings. In three well known plot summaries of the Wake, neither Adaline Glasheen in A Third Consensus of Finnegans Wake nor Campbell and Robinson’s A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake identify this section as a letter. William York Tindall in A Reader’s Guide to Finnegans Wake does call this footnote a letter, although he does not say why. But in early drafts of this section in his notebooks, Joyce clearly marked this passage as an epistle, by titling it with the word “letter.” What ensures that this final product is in fact a letter is the language of the text (Shelton 218). The opening of the footnote, “Come smooth of my slate to the beat of my blosh’ emphasizes that these words of Issy’s are written, rather than spoken, because students used to write on slates in classrooms instead of paper. In addition, Issy’s footnote is written in first person, an “I,” but is constantly addressed to a second person or a “you,” one of the hallmarks of epistolary discourse (Altman 117). In Issy’s footnote, the “I,” or letter writer, is obviously Issy since it has been established she is the author of all the footnotes in Book II, Chapter II; the addressee of the letter is a “Sr,” or an older male, Issy’s father (FW 279.F1). So this interjection is definitely some form of the included letter written by Issy to HCE.
Shelton argues that casting Issy as a highly erotic character “becomes the ground from which she speaks a disruptive story that threatens the gendered economy of power in Finnegans Wake” (202). Issy’s footnote discusses events in a classroom situation, but it is also full of sexual innuendoes. For example “Miss Laylock” is slang for the word “cunt” so the “thrills and ills of laylock blossoms” is probably an orgasm (FW 279.F1).37 Another example is “When we will conjugate together to lose her tomaster to miss while morrow fans amare hour, verbe de vie and verve to vie, with love ay loved have I on my back spine and does for ever” (FW 279.F1). “Together” is “to-get-her,” describing people coming together. “Tomaster” is “to-master” and “tomiss” “to-miss,” suggesting that the relationship being discussed is between a man of authority (a master) and a younger girl (a miss) and could be between a father and daughter. “Loved have I on my back spine” is a sentence that talks about the parts of a book, but also implies the missionary position. What makes Issy’s knowledge of sex so dangerous is that she is a victim of incest, so her sexual experiences have come from her father (Shelton 210). The letter, then, becomes a place where Issy can freely tell her own story, and her narrative changes the power dynamic between two of the characters; Issy’s voicing of her sexual knowledge gives her power over her father because his anxiety about being exposed makes him fear her, instead of making her fear him.

In her article, Shelton also develops an interpretation about the relationship between this footnoted letter and the more orthodox included letter on the next page. She

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37 McHugh 279.
notes: “Here Issy also establishes the letter form as the means of accusation in the text, 
doubly replicating the novel’s recurring epistle by mocking it as she inscribes her own 
story, then practicing it on the next page” (209).

Dear (name of desired subject, A.N.),
well, and I go on to. Shlicksher. I and we 
tender condolences for happy funeral, one 
if) so sorry to (mention person suppressed for 
the moment, F.M.). Well (enquiries after all-
healths) how are you (question maggy). A 
lovely (introduce to domestic circles) pershan 
of cates. Shrubsher. Those pothooks mostly 
she hawks from Poppa Vere Foster but these 
curly mequeues are of Mippa's moulding. 
Shrubsheruthr. (Wave gently in the ere turn-
ing ptover.) Well, mabby (consolation of 
shopes) to soon air. With best from cinder 
Christinette if prints chumming, can be when 
desires Soldi, for asamples, backfronted or, 
if all, peethrolio or Get my Prize, using her 
flower or perfume or, if veryveryvery chum-
mimg, in otherwards, who she supposed adeal, 
kissists my exits. Shlicksheruthr (FW 280.9-27)

This letter, unlike the one in the footnote, has several of the linguistic characteristics of 
ALP’s letter. It begins with “Dear,” and the writer offers condolences for a funeral, 
inquires after a “Maggy” or a “Mabby,” and closes with Xs, which traditionally represent 
kisses—“kisses my exits.” Like ALP’s final letter, there are a lot of references to fairy 
tales, although in this document “prints chumming” or “Prince Charming” could refer to 
investigates the story of a young woman who has multiple personality disorder. This
reference also explains why the name “Christine” appears in the letter, as this was the name of the young woman’s other personality.  

There are also several differences between this letter and ALP’s letter, which makes it more than just a replication of what Issy’s mother is said to have written, aligning it with the dynamics in the footnote. This document, like the footnoted letter, is sexually stimulating and therefore threatening. One of the distinctive characteristics of this section is the comments on Issy’s writing made by the narrator, who interrupts the text of the letter with his observations on the scene of writing. For example, instead of listing who Issy is writing to, the narrator just comments “name of desired subject,” and when she is finished with her letter, Issy waves it in the air to dry the ink as the narrator notes: “Wave gently in the ere turn ingptover.” “Shlicksher” could be Issy licking her pencil as she writes, and “Shrubsher” could be referring to the Persian cat that Issy wants to introduce into domestic circles (Campbell and Robinson 176). As when Bloom writes to Martha in “Sirens,” Joyce is recording the internal and external parts of the writing process. But these observations, especially those near the end of the letter, are very sexual and are hard to read innocently. “Shrubsheruther” and “Shlicksheruthr” sound like masturbatory references, connecting writing to sex as in Ulysses. Also like Martha Clifford, Issy ponders adding flowers or perfume to make her letter more “chuming,”

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38 McHugh 280. Some critics argue that Issy has multiple personality disorder as well. Her alter ego is Susie or other variations of that name.
39 The attention to the physical act of writing seems to make Issy some kind of an author figure, especially when the letter is a stand in for Finnegans Wake.
making the letter a manifestation of lust and desire. The erotic charge of this letter emphasizes Issy’s sexual experiences as well, and thus it continues to subvert the patriarchal power dynamic in this chapter.

Despite the fact that Issy’s letters show how language can challenge patriarchal structures, one of the most famous epistolary passages in the *Wake* question the ability of language to affect reality at all. As she does her homework, Issy muses on the roles that letters play within our lives and in society:

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Niecia Flappia          . . . All the world's in
Minnimiss. As          want and is writing a letters. 5
this is. And as       A letters from a
this this is.          person to a place about a thing. And all the
Dear Brotus,           world's on wish to be carrying a letters. A let-
land me arrears.       ters to a king about a treasure from a cat. 6

Rockaby, babel,       When men want to write a letters. Ten men,
flatten a wall.        ton men, pen men, pun men, wont to rise a
How he broke the       ladder. And den men, dun men, fen men, fun
good news to           men, hen men, hun men went to raze a leader.
Gent.                  Is then any lettersday from many peoples,

3 When I'am Enastella and am taken for Essastessa I'll do that droop on the
pohlmann's piano.

4 Heavenly twinges, if it's one of his I'll fearly feint as swoon as he enter-
rooms.

5 To be slipped on, to be slept by, to be conned to, to be kept up. And when
you're done push the chain.

6 With her modesties office.

7 Strutting as proud as a great turquin weggin that cuckhold on his Eddems
and Clay's hat.
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The commentary in the main section of this passage posits letters as objects that fulfill some sort of need for everyone in the world. The generic terms “person,” “place,” and “thing” that are associated with letters acknowledge the myriad of possible topics that letters could discuss and emphasize their universality. This passage also forms connections between change and letter writing, as letters become associated with those men who want to “rise a ladder,” or advance to the top. This idea is also present in the commentary in the margins, which parodies lines from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, combining the “Dear” of a letter with the famous line, “lend me your ears,” spoken by Mark Antony. Issy then remarks on how all sorts of men want to raise “a leader,” linking letters with political action and even revolution. Again, this insinuation is present in the gloss, which combines three cultural references associated with destructive acts: the nursery rhyme “Rockabye Baby,” where a crib falls from a tree top, the biblical Tower of Babel, which collapses, and the wall that Humpty Dumpty sat on, which here appears to be flattened. This discussion ends by inquiring whether letters have come in from the outermost reaches of the empire and asks if even a postcard arrived? Please.40

The footnotes to this passage, however, undermine these depictions of letters as universal means of communication and catalysts for change. The first footnote ends with “when you’re done, push the chain” connecting letters to going to the bathroom and flushing the toilet and referencing early descriptions of ALP’s letter, which was initially described as “a huge chain envelope.” The next footnote to “A letters to a king about a treasure from a cat” is “With her modieisted office.” This phrase sounds like, “On her Majesty’s service,” which could be the Royal Mail, but it could also mean, “With her

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40 This desire for a postcard links Issy’s letter to the postcard that ALP’s letter promises.
modesties off,” which could be a woman taking off her underwear, maybe to go to the bathroom, again directing the conversations about letters back to feces and the toilet. Many critics have written on the connection between scatology and the creative process in all of Joyce’s works, but especially in the Wake. In “Goddinpotty, James Joyce and the Language of Excrement,” Vincent Cheng writes, “[Joyce] shows us how, in the artist (as in the God of Creation) the two activities—elimination and creation—are functionally related to each other. The artist’s art is what he craps” (95). This passage from the Wake, however, is about epistolary not artistic activities, and it does not contain any major references to creation. And unlike other places in Joyce’s works (Leopold Bloom dumping his chamber pot in his garden to help it grow or Shem the Penmen using his feces and urine to write on his body) there are no elements of transition in these passages: this crap is not turned into anything else. It retains its original form and takes a one-way journey to the sewer. The American phrase similar to “pulling the chain” is “flushing the toilet,” and the saying “flushed down the toilet” implies that something is never coming back. So the footnotes to this passage not only question the usefulness of letters in general, but highlight the possibility that letters can be lost forever.

The Letter as Literature

Like the modernist writers discussed in Chapter 2, the letters in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake are more than just included documents: Martha’s letter to Bloom and ALP’s letter become representative of the works themselves in the form of a mise en abyme. As previously mentioned, Martha never writes in one single tone or with one type of language; her letter is polyvocal—a symphony of other women’s voices, most of
which are found in other episodes of *Ulysses*. The first line that Martha writes mirrors one found in an earlier letter in the text, Milly Bloom’s letter to her father, because both women begin by thanking Bloom for gifts he has given them. Martha also has a mean streak and writes: “Remember if you do not I will punish you” (U 63-64). This language, with its themes of anger and castigation, its continual references to punishment, and its use of the nicknames, which imply a sexual, but submissive male figure, is similar to that of a dominatrix. These words of Martha’s are like those of Bella Cohen, the whore-mistress, who mentally and physically abuses Bloom in “Circe.” Martha’s letter also contains sentimental and romantic rhetoric, which emulates the language of a virgin. Her question, “Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word?” is supposed to imply that she is ignorant about what dirty, sexual words really mean, and this phrase echoes the thoughts of Gerty McDowell in “Nausicaa” (U 63). “Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?” is a sort of taunting line, laced with seduction and sexual innuendo that a prostitute would use (U 63). This question, more a come-on with obvious sadomasochistic overtones is similar to the questions Zoe asks Bloom when she meets him in Nighttown. At the end of her letter, Martha stops being a dominatrix and becomes just plain demanding. The phrase “Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are [sic] exhausted” is like the commands Molly Bloom gives her husband during the breakfast scene in “Calypso” (U 64).

Martha’s linguistic performance in her letter parallels the performance of the narrator in *Ulysses*. The narrator of the novel uses many different rhetorics, languages, and linguistic stereotypes, thus preventing any attempt to ascribe a single, stable, identity to it. In “Aeolus,” the narrator uses the linguistic stereotype of the newspaper; in “Oxen
of the Sun,” it uses the linguistic stereotypes of different evolutionary stages of the English language; in “Ithaca” it uses the rhetoric of the Catholic catechism, just to name a few. The narrator of Ulysses is sometimes present, sometimes not, a shape-shifter constantly playing games with language. Because the narrator is so ephemeral, even the term “narrator” becomes a problematic description of whoever or whatever is telling the story of Ulysses.

Martha and the narrator are two very similar entities. Both continually use different linguistic stereotypes when they write, which gives them a fluid, fleeting identity, preventing them from being contained by a single category. Thinking about Martha’s letter as a mise en abyme in Ulysses reinforces the parallels between her writing and the writing of the narrator and creates a strong affinity between the two figures. Martha uses different linguistic stereotypes in her letter to Bloom to hide her real identity, but her performance of these linguistic stereotypes demonstrates the parallels between her and the narrator of Ulysses and makes her letter a replication of the text as a whole.

ALP’s letter is also a microcosm of the larger work, but her included letter is different from others in Joyce’s oeuvre, and any others in modernist fiction, because by the text’s own admission it is directly conflated with Finnegans Wake. The text itself continually equates the letter with the rest of the work as whole. The descriptions the characters give of the letter are similar to the actual structure of Finnegans Wake. When Kate is asked to read the letter at HCE’s trial, the gallery response of “A” and “O,” which juxtaposes the Greek alpha and omega, demonstrates that beginnings and endings are connected, that an ending is another beginning and a beginning is an ending. This theme is prominent in the rest of the Wake, but clearly manifested in the first and last lines of
the book. “A way a lone a last a loved along the” fades off only to connect to the first sentence on the first page “riverrun past Eve and Adam’s” (FW 628.15-16; 3.1). Advice in the text on reading the letter is also useful advice for reading Finnegans Wake. In Chapter 5, the “Mamafesta,” the professor instructs readers on how to approach ALP’s letter. “Now, patience; and remember patience is the great thing, and above all things else we must avoid anything like being or becoming out of patience” is also sound advice for flesh and blood readers who, by page 108, are probably frustrated (FW 108.8-11). The letter is something for “an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia,” another accurate comparison between it and Finnegans Wake (FW 120.13-14).

The fact that the symbols supposedly in ALP’s letter are the same ones Joyce used as he was writing Finnegans Wake confirms the relationship between the epistle and the novel. Later in Chapter I, Book 5, the professor begins to speculate who wrote the letter and notes, “inferring from the nonpresence of inverted commas (sometimes called quotation marks) on any page that its author was always constitutionally incapable of misappropriating the spoken words of others” (FW 108.33-36). The author of the letter does not like to use quotation marks, a punctuation mark that Joyce detested and avoided. ALP’s letter also contains mysterious markings:

...the meant to be baffling chrismon trilithon sign finally called after some his hes hesitancy Hec, which, moved contrawatchwise, represents his title in sigla as the smaller Δ, fontly called following a certain change of state of grace of nature alp or delta, when single, stands for or tautologically stands beside the consort:...why not take the former for a village inn, the latter for an upsidown bridge, a multiplication marking for crossroad ahead, which you like pothook for the family gibbet, their old fourwheeder for the buckers field, a tea anyway for a tryst someday, and his onesidemissing for an allblind alley leading to an Irish plot in the Champ de Mors, not?) (FW 119.17-32).
Joyce used these same markings as a type of shorthand when he was writing the *Wake*. HCE’s symbol was an “E” or “the meant to be baffling chrismon trilithon sign ‘T’” that can be rotated to represent him in his pre-fall or fallen state. His “constort” ALP’s symbol is a ▲, because she is also the river Liffey, the delta, that flows through Dublin. The “village inn” could be describing the shape of a building, which is similar to a square, and □ was what Joyce used to represent the title of the book. An “upsidown bridge” or upside-down bridge, might look like a □. This is the sign Joyce used for Issy, HCE’s daughter. The multiplication markings × in the above passage is what Joyce used to represent the four old judges, and the pothook, a stroke in writing, which looks like | is the symbol for Shem the Penman. A T for tryst is the symbol for Tristan, who played a larger role in earlier versions of the work, and the “allblind alley,” perhaps an Λ, could be the symbol for Shaun (McHugh xi). The professor notes that errors in the letter are pointed out with red marks, which is how Joyce corrected his proofs, and that ALP’s letter uses Greek Es, like Leopold Bloom does in *Ulysses*, but also like Joyce did in his amorous letters to Martha Fleischmann. And finally it is revealed at the end of Chapter 5 that the author of the letter is Shem the Penman, Joyce’s autobiographical character. So ALP’s letter is more than a physical object or a puzzle for readers—it is the *Wake* itself.

In Book II of *Finnegans Wake*, Issy observes: “All the world’s in want and is writing a letters.” Issy’s musings on the epistolary form emphasize that letters have the ability to fulfill some sort of general need in our lives and seem to apply to Joyce’s use of
the letter in his writings. Joyce’s fiction is full of various communicative media, such as songs, poems, note cards, newspapers, novels, and folktales, just to name a few, but he chose the letter out of all of these to be representative of his last work of art, making the letter literature and literature the letter.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss how the letter continues to satisfy the “wants” of postmodern authors, even as it is becoming obsolete in general media ecology. These authors continue Joyce’s treatment of the epistolary form, investigating the ways in which language complicates representations of the subjective experience and exploring the letter’s relationship to different states of being.
CHAPTER 4

“You’ve got mail”: The Epistolary Tradition in the Postmodern Era

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, the main character, nine-year-old New Yorker Oskar Schnell, teaches his doorman, Stan, to say “You’ve got mail,” when he receives a letter, mimicking the vocal announcement used by America Online to let their subscribers know they have received email. Ironically in this situation, the term used to alert people to incoming email is used to let Oskar know he has received what’s now called “snail mail” or traditional paper letters. This play on words in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close reveals the diversity of the media ecology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. After World War II, and especially in the last 15 years, the technology that people use to communicate has been rapidly advancing in several different areas, producing newer and faster ways to send messages to others. In the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, the telephone, which was unpopular in England but extremely popular in America, slowly began to become a necessary part of the British lifestyle. As more family units separated because people began moving to new towns or to the suburbs, they used the telephone to keep in touch (Young 190). New developments in technology that produced smaller and cheaper phones, more cost effective ways of calling, and more accurate methods of dialing, soon allowed families on both sides of the Atlantic to have one or more telephones in their homes (Young 203-39).
Recently the field of telephony has again been revolutionized with the widespread use of cellular phones, allowing individuals to talk to each other from almost anywhere. In 2005 when *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was published, it was estimated that 195 million Americans used cell phones, and in 2004 it was estimated that 61 million residents of the United Kingdom used cell phones, numbers that have surely increased over the last two or three years (*Cell Phone Usage*). The Internet, which was originally used to connect the computers of the United States Military (in case of a nuclear attack), has been adapted for use in public households and businesses, allowing people to send electronic messages to each other almost instantly (Solymar 276). Research groups estimate that 171 billion emails are sent each day all over the world, which is about 2 million a second (Tschabitscher).1

Stan’s repetition of AOL’s commercial slogan also emphasizes the continued presence of the letter in this digital information age, for despite the many developments in communication technology that have taken place, letters still play a major role in late twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction. In this chapter I will examine Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, AS Byatt’s *Possession*, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and argue that the use of letters in postmodernist fiction continues to question the elements of the epistolary tradition. Initially the use of letters in these postmodern novels continues modernist investigations into the ways language fails to capture reality, extending the modernists’ reexamination of the character element of the epistolary tradition. But, like Joyce, postmodern authors eventually begin to explore the relationship between letters and

1 Between 120 and 123 billion emails, or about 70% to 72%, are actually spam and viruses (Tschabitscher).
different levels of reality inside and outside the text. The narrative element in these novels initially emphasizes issues of misinterpretation, but then shifts to emphasize issues of incoherence, as letters create new storyworlds and fragment the narrative of texts; likewise revising the reader element of the epistolary tradition, the texts focus more on the ability of the letter to communicate with external readers rather than with fictional characters. In addition, although the depictions of communication in these novels stress the difficulty of writing and the unsuccessful exchanging of messages, they also present the possibility that genuine communication does exist and can, temporarily at least, create connections between individuals.

“I feel I haven’t said anything properly”: The Problems with Language

The narrator of Jacob’s Room describes letter writing as “mendacious,” a comment justified by the letters composed by Helen Schlegel, Betty Flanders, Connie Chatterley, and Fay Doyle (Woolf 109). As mentioned in Chapter 2, each of these letter writers deliberately omits information from their missives, misrepresenting events in the novel or disguising their feelings. Conversely, in some postmodern novels, characters once again believe the epistolary form can be used to accurately represent their internal states. Christabel LaMotte, Robbie Turner, and Julian Baffin all write letters in the hope of expressing their true thoughts and feelings to another person, re-establishing the character element of the epistolary tradition. But despite their efforts, they still struggle to articulate themselves. Although the characters in these postmodern texts hope to make the letter a genuine expression of their thoughts, the letters in Possession, Atonement, and The Black Prince ultimately continue to expose the ways language complicates
representations of the subjective experience. In Possession, Christabel LaMotte struggles to explain the theft of a letter. Julian Baffin’s letter to Bradley Pearson contains several eighteenth-century characteristics of letters, but still seems unable to clearly explain her feelings. Robbie Turner also seems unable to compose a letter that expresses how he truly feels, but during one brief moment, his writing temporarily voices his subconscious thoughts, the desires he was trying to deny. This letter ends up exaggerating his lust for Cecilia rather than his love for her, the consequences of which resonate throughout the novel.

In Possession, an unexpected encounter makes poet Christabel LaMotte temporarily at a loss of words. Initially LaMotte showcases her writing ability and her control of language in her correspondence. In her first letter to Randolph Henry Ash, LaMotte’s response to Ash’s letter is very contrived and mischievous, perhaps to conceal her personality and dissuade Ash from writing again. In order to distance herself from her addressee, she uses metaphors, like Mellors and Clifford do in their letters to Connie in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, to describe her way of life and to talk about herself indirectly. In her letter she compares herself to

\[\ldots\text{a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining web, if you will forgive me the slight disagreeable analogy. Arachne is a lady I am greatly sympathetic to, an honest craftswoman, who makes perfect patterns, but is a little inclined to take unorthodox snaps at visiting or trespassing strangers, not perceiving the distinction between the two, it may be, often until too late.}\]  

(Byatt 97)
After their correspondence develops, an event occurs which causes LaMotte to lose control of her language. One of Ash’s letters to LaMotte opens by saying that he has not received any answer from her to any of his three previous notes, and LaMotte’s reply explains why. She writes that Ash’s letters to her have been stolen and the poem that he sent her is lost: “Dear Sir—your Letters have not reached me—for a Reason. Not your Raven-ous letters—nor yet, to my infinite loss—your Poem. I fear—I know indeed, with all but ocular proof positive—they have been Taken” (Byatt 207). Although she does not explicitly accuse anyone of stealing the letters, her letter implies that her housemate, and possibly lesbian lover, Blanche Glover, stole the letters in order to protect LaMotte’s reputation and perhaps because she was jealous of the attention Ash was receiving. LaMotte says, “Today I happened—to run a little faster to greet the Postman. There was almost a papery—Tussle. I snatched. To my shame—to our shame—we—snatched” (Byatt 207).

LaMotte discusses the difficulties she faces in trying to write this letter, and her temporary inability to articulate her thoughts is apparent in her prose. LaMotte begins by saying, “This is not the first time this letter has been embarked upon. I neither know how to start nor how to proceed. A Circumstance has arisen—no, I know no longer how to write, neither, for how could a circumstance arise, or what appearance might such a creature—bear?” (Byatt 207). For once the language that is the driving force of her life is failing her. She admits to having written unsuccessful drafts of this letter and expresses her frustration in trying to describe what happened. Later she even crosses out words, “But to stoop to Theft,” and her excessive use of dashes and short sentences are more prominent here than in her earlier letters. LaMotte’s letter attempts to describe her
internal state when writing—she even notes that “I am torn by contrary emotions”—so it tries to be a genuine representation of what she is feeling, but like in many modernist novels, the act of writing has become a struggle (Byatt 207). She ends her letter by proposing that she and Ash finally meet face to face so that she can apologize for the loss of his poem.

In Iris Murdoch’s The Black Prince, Julian Baffin’s letter to the main character Bradley Pearson contains several eighteenth-century characteristics of letters, but in the end, one of the main themes in her epistle is that she, like Christabel LaMotte, cannot express how she feels. Julian’s letter attempts to clarify her feelings about what happened in the past. When she tries to explain why she left Bradley at his rented beach house she says:

> I just felt I had to be alone and I couldn’t talk any more. Suddenly everything became dark and awful inside me and I had to get away by myself. *Forgive me.* Everything seemed suddenly so muddled as if all the pieces were shifting. It was my fault, I ought not to have come with you to the country, I ought to have thought a bit. Then everything happened so fast that I felt as if my life was suddenly bursting and I had to get away, *please understand.* I didn’t want to leave you, I didn’t change my feelings, it wasn’t that at all, it was just like having to breathe. (Murdoch 361)

She also tries to talk about her emotions at the time of writing. In her first paragraph she writes, “I am so sorry and miserable,” and a couple of sentences later she continues, “I still feel so confused and almost as if I had forgotten things, like after a car crash. I feel I’ve had a bad dream, but the badness is all my own stupidity and muddle and not understanding my own emotions” (Murdoch 361). Again, in the eighteenth century, Richardson used the epistolary form because it could decrease the amount of time between when events take place and when they are recorded, and in this letter, Julian
records her thoughts at the present time along with the events that are taking place around her. In the first paragraph she says as an aside, “(I can’t write very clearly here in this hotel. People keep coming into the room. There is not proper table in the bedroom),” and in her second paragraph she describe how her father had just taken their car to the mechanic because there is a problem with the hood (Murdoch 361). During her attempts to end her letter, she writes, “I really can’t concentrate, there’s a lot of noise. A Frenchman is staring at me, they do stare so” (Murdoch 363). All of these comments are talking about events that took place immediately after they happened and thus are emblematic of Richardson’s famous “writing to the minute” style.

The random presentation of Julian’s thoughts in her letter not only illustrates her trouble composing the letter, but reflects the pattern of her thoughts as she is writing. She mentions in the first paragraph “I can’t now feel that I could possibly have been adequate to you or that it was *me* that you needed” and repeats the exact same ideas a couple of lines later, “I feel I was just a second best though. I felt that night before I went away that it couldn’t be me that you wanted” (Murdoch 362). Twice in the letter Julian tells Bradley how she thinks he should be relieved that their relationship is over, “Perhaps you feel relieved,” and later at the end of the letter “I expect you feel relieved and set free though” (Murdoch 362; 363). Julian recognizes the repetitive nature of her prose when she says, “I must stop this letter, I keep saying the same things over and over again, you must be fed up” (Murdoch 363). Another sign that the chaotic arrangement of Julian’s letter is meant to be a physical record of her thoughts is when she begins her story about

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2 Julian’s language here reveals that she doubts if Bradley had a clear image of her during their sojourn by the sea, supporting Nussbaum’s argument.
how she left Bradley in the first paragraph and finishes it in the third. As mentioned in
the introduction, Robert Adams Day argues that the epistolary form can “show the actual
workings of the mind, its veerings and incoherences, the shape which thoughts take place
before they are arranged for formal presentation” (8). Julian’s letter seems to fit this
description and is supposed to represent her subjective experience.

Julian’s letter jumps from topic to topic, but one theme that is woven into her text is
the difficulty of writing and her inability to express herself. After trying to discuss that
she felt she was not adequate for Bradley, she notes, “Sorry I’m not explaining this
properly” and later in the same paragraph repeats again, “I’m sorry, I can’t explain
properly, I can’t think” (Murdoch 362). Her frustration with writing is again exhibited at
the end of the letter, when she feels that she can’t close it—it is as if she can’t physically
stop writing. “I can’t end this letter, I feel I haven’t said anything properly, and there’s
something else I should say” (Murdoch 363). Even the constant repetition of certain
themes, phrases, and words, and the lack of organization of the ideas in the letter is
another sign that Julian is struggling to articulate her thoughts.

In Atonement, Robbie Turner faces a similar problem as he tries to write a note to
Cecilia Tallis. After a fight with Cecilia where he accidentally broke part of a valuable
family heirloom, Robbie decides to try to write Cecilia a letter to explain his recent
actions; unlike LaMotte and Julian he is actually depicted writing a letter. He is hoping it
will be, “a conventional apology for his ‘clumsy and inconsiderate behavior’”(McEwan

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3 Tallis is the name of one of Iris Murdoch’s characters in A Fairly Honorable Defeat (Dipple 140).
He writes for a while, but then stops. His main dilemma is if he should tell Cecilia about his love for her, so before he continues writing, he is debating how much of his feelings he should reveal in the letter: “. . . then he paused. Was he going to make any show of feeling at all, and if so, at what level?” (McEwan 79).

He starting typing again and writes: “If it’s any excuse, I’ve noticed just lately that I’m rather lightheaded in your presence. I mean, I’ve never gone barefoot in someone’s house before. It must be the heat” (McEwan 80). He rejects these sentences because they were too jocular, camouflaging his real feelings, protecting himself. He tries again, “It’s hardly an excuse, I know, but lately I seem to be awfully lightheaded around you. What was I doing, walking barefoot into your house? And have I ever snapped off the rim of an antique vase before? . . . Cee, I don’t think I can blame the heat!” (McEwan 80). Now he thinks that the rhetorical questions are too “melodramatic” and that the exclamation mark adds a sense of humor that continues to de-emphasize his message (McEwan 80). He crosses out the exclamation mark and tries again, this time using her full name: “Cecilia, I don’t think I can blame the heat” (McEwan 80). The narrator describes his thoughts about what he has written by saying, “Now the humor was removed and an element of self pity had crept in. The exclamation mark would have to be reinstated. Volume was obviously not its only business” (McEwan 80). As he is writing to Cecilia, Robbie struggles not only with words, like LaMotte, but with the symbols in the English language that are supposed to help us express emotion. He got a first in English Literature at Cambridge, and thus is acutely aware of how a sentence will be

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4 Robbie’s fight with Cecilia took place by a fountain, calling to mind other important literary fountains in the beginning half of the twentieth century, namely the Italian Fountain in Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited and the place where Peter and Clarissa break up in Mrs. Dalloway (Hidalgo 84; Apstein 11).
received if it ends with period or with an exclamation mark. His mental debates about punctuation only highlight the difficulties he is having trying to articulate his feelings about Cecilia to her in a way that might mend the growing rift between them.

Robbie revises what he has written and types the final version of his letter on a clean sheet of paper. The most important part of the letter reads, “You’d be forgiven for thinking me mad—wandering into your house barefoot, or snapping your antique vase. The truth is, I feel rather lightheaded and foolish in your presence, Cee, and I don’t think I can blame the heat! Will you forgive me? Robbie” (McEwan 80). Just when Robbie thinks his letter is finally finished, he has a daydream, perhaps inspired by the medical diagram of a vagina on his desk, and writes a vulgar coda to his carefully penned note, “… he dropped forward and typed before he could stop himself, ‘In my dreams, I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long’” (McEwan 80). Although the purpose of Robbie’s letter was to comically call attention to his past actions and circumspectly disclose some of his feelings, it ends up voicing his deepest desires, and in that moment, the language of the letter represents one particular facet of his subjective experience—his sexual fantasies. Robbie knows that using offensive language in the letter could have dangerous consequences if anyone, especially Cecilia, were to see it, so he puts that draft of the letter aside, and handwrites a more

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5 In his letter, Robbie can write the word that neither Molly nor Leopold Bloom can even say in Ulysses.
6 Before Robbie and Cecilia have their scuffle over the antique vase, Cecilia has been spending her days reading Clarissa while she is trying to figure out what she wants to do with her life. When she meets Robbie by the fountain, the two haltingly speak of the book. Robbie asks her how Clarissa is going, and she replies that it is “boring” and that “I’d rather read Fielding any day” (McEwan 24). Robbie says, “I know what you mean . . . There’s more life in Fielding, but he can be psychologically crude compared to Richardson” (McEwan 24). Robbie’s comments draw connections between the letter in literature, which Richardson mastered with his epistolary novels, and psychology, suggesting that the epistolary form is associated with the depictions of characters’ internal states, as was the case in the novels of the eighteenth century. This discussion could foreshadow the more traditional uses of letters in Atonement.
innocent version of his note. On his way to dinner, he sees Cecilia’s sister Briony and
asks her to give the letter to Cecilia, and it is only after he has lost sight of the thirteen-
year-old girl that he realizes he gave her the typewritten note, not the handwritten one.\(^7\)
The last sentence Robbie wrote presented a partial picture of his internal state,
emphasizing his lust for Cecilia instead of the whole range of his feelings for her.

All of the letter writers discussed above grapple with language as they try to
bridge the gap between their thoughts and emotions and the words that can voice these
things to others. The very prose in these letters reflects the writers’ inability to articulate
themselves clearly in some situations: Christabel LaMotte crosses out words in her letter
to Ash; Julian Baffin’s letter is disorganized, reflecting her confusing feelings; and
Robbie Turner writes at least four drafts of his apology. But despite the portrayal of
writing as a problematic process, the letters in the above texts still strive to be a genuine.

The desire for the letter to retain its authenticity is contrasted with another form of
media that has also been used to record the subjective experience, the journal. There are
three selections from journals in Possession, and the excerpts from those written by
Blanche Glover and Ellen Ash are incomplete pictures of the respective women’s
subjective experiences.\(^8\) Both talk about important events indirectly and leave out

\(^7\) According to Brian Finney in “Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's
Atonement,” the situation in LP Hartley’s The Go-Between influenced McEwan’s decision to designate
Briony as a temporary letter carrier (72).

\(^8\) Lynn Z. Bloom argues that the diary genre can be split into two sub genres: the “truly private diary” and
the “public private diary” (23-27). All three journals in Possession eventually end up in the public eye, but
only two were written with other people in mind. Blanche’s journal can be classified as a “truly private
diary,” and as will be discussed in more detail, Ellen Ash’s diary is a “public private diary.” Sabine de
Kercoz’s journal, which she begins at the promptings of her cousin, Christabel LaMotte, is also a “public
private diary,” which she compares to a letter, a form that traditionally straddles the public and private
sphere. Sabine notes in her first entry, “Am I writing this for Christabel to see, as a kind of \textit{devoir}—a
writer’s exercises—over even as a kind of intimate letter for her to read alone in moments of contemplation
or withdrawal?” (Byatt 365).
important information. Blanche straightforwardly discusses LaMotte’s obsessive letter writing in her journal, but her last couple of entries speak of a “Prowler,” a “Hunter,” a “Peeping Tom,” and a “Wolf” (Byatt 53; 54). These metaphors articulate Blanche’s feelings that someone is threatening her household, but they do not emphasize the fact that LaMotte’s anonymous correspondence is the cause of her anxiety. Blanche’s theft of the letters shows that she knows exactly who is jeopardizing the happiness in their home, even though this information is not recorded in her journal. Ellen Ash’s journal is equally reticent about her husband’s affair and her feelings toward his mistress. Ellen is paranoid that someone will go through Ash’s personal things, exposing his private life, like people did with Dickens’ papers, and she is very conscious about what sort of narrative she wants told about her husband’s life and her own. In “‘Burn What They Should Not See’: The Private Journal as Public Text in AS Byatt's Possession,” Adrienne Shiffman argues that Ellen’s “awareness of a possible readership, present or future, determines both the journal’s subject matter and its approach and consequently calls into question the whole status of the diary as a private literary construct” (96). Ellen compares “the truth” of her journal to jelly making and calls it “carefully strained” (Byatt 501). Straining is a process which separates different components of a substance, and thus by using this metaphor, Ellen implies that she has separated her life into different categories and that only some of what she experiences is incorporated into her journal. Ellen is comfortable facing the truth about her life, but not comfortable writing all of it down: “She had always believed stolidly, doggedly, that her avoidance, her approximations, her whole charade as she at times saw it, were, if not justified, at least held in check, neutralised, by her rigorous requirement that she be truthful with herself”
So when Ellen discusses a series of letters that she received from a "mysterious and urgent" lady, and later in her journal, when she records her meeting with this person, she never directly mentions the topic of their conversation, helping to delay the revelation about her husband’s affair (Byatt 250). This exclusion is but one of many in Ellen’s journal, causing Lisa Sternlieb in the conclusion to her book, titled, “Refusing to Tell,” to argue that Ellen Ash is a “master puppeteer” like her husband except, “her manipulation throughout is a manipulation by omission” (141). Briony Tallis also blurs the line between reality and fantasy in the “journal” that she keeps while training as a nurse. Although she writes about her daily life in the hospital, she changes the names of the patients, and soon even changes the descriptions of the incidents she sees: “And having changed the names, it became easier to transform the circumstances and events . . . She was under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no one a chronicle” (McEwan 264). Both the letter and the journal have been used in literature as a method of recording a character’s thoughts, but in Possession and Atonement, the uses of letters in these texts tries to retain much of its original purpose, while the journal, like letters in modernist fiction, is a site of gaps, omissions, and misrepresentations.

Moments when modernist letters contained exclusions and distortions often occurred when letter writers tried to speak of love. Because they attempt to represent a character’s subjective experience, letters in The Black Prince, Possession, and Atonement, on the other hand, openly acknowledge love and are the primary form of media used to express that emotion. Julian’s letter in The Black Prince recognizes the

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9 Shiffman argues that “Ellen’s journal exploits the way in which diaries can be constructed like any other writing. The boundaries between diarist, and author, ordinary and extraordinary, private and public conflate, and the female diarist ultimately emerges as a powerful literary talent” (95).
love that she and Bradley temporarily shared at the cabin, though at the time of writing she has misgivings about her true feelings. Cecilia Tallis falls in love with Robbie Turner in *Atonement* because of the letter he wrote to her voicing his love and his desires. Throughout their separation, Robbie and Cecilia rely on their written correspondence to maintain their relationship with one another and to have sex. The narrator notes that, “Robbie and Cecilia had been making love for years—by post” and both connotations of “making love” are applicable in this statement (McEwan 193). Robbie and Cecilia use their letters to share their feelings and, as in *Ulysses*, to achieve sexual gratification. Since Robbie has been diagnosed as being oversexed, they talk about their desire in a code and use euphemisms to talk about sex: for example, “a quiet corner in the library” where they first had sex was a code word for orgasm (McEwan 192). In *Possession*, the act of correspondence causes the two Victorian poets to fall in love with each other, and the act of exploring the love letters causes the two literary critics to fall in love with each other.

One of the letters Oskar Schnell receives in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* also initially appears to be an authentic representation of a character’s thought. Oskar begins to write to a variety of different individuals after his father dies in the terrorist attacks of September 11th, and the person Oskar receives the most letters from is Stephen Hawking. Oskar writes his first letter to Stephen Hawking a couple of weeks after his father dies.

*Dear Stephen Hawking*
*Can I please be your protégé?*
*Thanks,*
*Oskar Schnell* (Foer 11)
A couple of days later he gets this letter in the mail:

Thank you for your letter. Because of the large volume of mail I receive, I am unable to write personal responses. Nevertheless, know that I read and save every letter, with the hope of one day being able to give each the proper response it deserves. Until that day,

Most Sincerely,

Stephen Hawking (Foer 12)

The letter Oskar receives isn’t from the real Stephen Hawking, but it is an automated response from a character in the novel who is modeled after the famous astrophysicist. The letter in this situation, then, bridges several levels of reality surrounding the text, because Oskar corresponds with a character who occupies the diegetic level of the novel but who also represents a real person in the flesh and blood world. Oskar’s correspondence with Hawking parallels the ways the narrative and reader elements are used in postmodern fiction. Both of these elements are used in the late twentieth century to explore the relationship between letters and different levels of reality inside and outside the text.

“Why I’m Not Where You Are”: The Fragmentation of the Storyworld

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, four sections of the novel, all titled “Why I’m Not Where You Are,” are letters written by Oskar’s grandfather to his son, Oskar’s dad. In addition, Oskar’s grandmother writes one long letter to her grandson that is presented in four different sections, each titled “My Feelings” and all dated September 11, 2003. These letters talk about the lives of

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10 Two sections of “Why I’m Not Where You Are” are dated 5/21/63 and are parts of the same letter. Another section is dated 4/12/78 and is the only letter that the older Thomas Schnell ever mailed; Oskar’s dad loved to proofread articles in the New York Times, thus the correction symbols in red ink that mark up
Oskar’s grandparents, but other than some thematic similarities, seem to have little bearing on the main storyline—Oskar’s search for the lock that can be opened with his dad’s key. The discrepancy between these stories work to make the narrative of the text incoherent. In order to chart the narrative element of the epistolary tradition’s move to incoherence, in this section, I will examine the narrative structures of The Black Prince, Atonement, Possession, and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close to see how the letter’s relationship to narrative changes over the course of the late twentieth century. I argue that letters in the above texts initially focus on misreading but progress towards incoherence. Thus letters, which were originally used to provide multiple versions of events in fiction, making the storyworld more coherent, ultimately are used in twenty and twenty-first century novels to fragment the narrative structure of the text and create multiple diegetic levels in the novel.

In Iris Murdoch’s The Black Prince, Bradley Pearson sits down to write a couple of letters, which he hopes will tie up some loose ends with several of his friends and acquaintances. While sitting at his desk, he thinks about his own attitude towards letters.

I am, I must confess an obsessive and superstitious letter writer. When I am troubled I will write any long letter rather than make a telephone call. This is perhaps becomes I invest letters with magical power. To desiderate something in a letter is, I often irrationally feel, tantamount to bringing it about. A letter is a barrier, a reprieve, a charm against the world, and almost infallible method of acting at a distance. (And it must be admitted of passing the buck.) It is a way of bidding time to stop. (Murdoch 54-5)

In this quotation, Bradley describes the epistolary form as being able to convey information more effectively than the phone and having the ability to impact reality.

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the letter indicate that Oskar’s dad received and read this letter from his father. The last letter written by Oskar’s grandfather is dated September 11, 2003, two years after his son’s death.
Despite Bradley’s initial assertions, however, events in the text emphasize how letters are misread, impotent, and unreliable. The first of Bradley’s actions “at a distance” is directed towards the novelist, Arnold Baffin. In his letter, Bradley apologizes for witnessing the traumatic fight that Arnold had with his wife Rachel, assures them he is trying to forget the incident, and asks them to stop their acquaintance with Francis Marlow, his ex-wife’s brother-in-law and former doctor, whom Bradley took with him to the Baffins in case there was an extreme emergency. He next writes a letter to the Baffin’s daughter, Julian, where he revokes his earlier promise to teach her how to write, suggests a couple of works of literature to read, and discusses his own personal theories about art. In his letter to Francis Marlow, Bradley thanks him for his help at the Baffins. He also reiterates his wish from his first letter by warning Marlow not to try to befriend the Baffins. Lastly he writes to his ex-wife Christian Evandale expressing his desire not to see her even though she has moved back to London. After finishing his letter to Christian, however, Bradley acknowledges that the outcome of sending these letters could be exactly the opposite of their original intentions: “However a letter, as I have at times to my own cost forgotten, is not only a piece of self expression; it is also a statement, suggestion, persuasion, command, and its sheer effectiveness in those respects needs to be objectively estimated. . . It now seemed possible that the effect would be the exact reverse of what I desired” (Murdoch 59). Because of these remembrances, Bradley decides to send the letters to Arnold, Julian, and Francis, but not the letter to Christian.

11 In Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s, Barbara Stevens Heusel distinguishes between “Bradley the writer” and “Bradley the participant” in The Black Prince and argues that the letters Bradley writes in the text are meant to showcase “the conflicting voices in his personality” (127). Gillian Dooley in “Iris Murdoch's Use of First-Person Narrative in The Black Prince” exposes the fictional convention of homodiegetic narrators including, and thus being able to completely remember, letters in their texts (136). Julian will call attention to this convention as well in the postscript.
Bradley’s second musings on letters are almost a premonition of how his correspondence is to be received by others; each of his recipients seems to miss or ignore the message that he was trying to send. Francis Marlow continues to show up unannounced at Bradley’s flat. Despite Bradley’s epistolary plea, Arnold Baffin wants to talk about the scene Bradley witnessed with Rachel, and in addition, talk more about Bradley’s ex-wife. Julian thought that the ideas Bradley expressed in his letter about art and life were beautiful, but she seems to have completely ignored his request to be relieved of his teaching obligations. Bradley never even posted the letter he wrote to Christian, but Christian happens to pay Bradley a visit while he is having a crisis—he thinks his sister has committed suicide. To get her away from the chaos, Arnold takes Christian to a pub and gives her the letter that Bradley didn’t send. This letter, like Bradley predicted, has the opposite effect of what he intended, because she still wants to see him. Bradley’s “almost infallible method of acting at a distance” is completely fallible because his letters are misinterpreted. His entreaties to be left alone and desire to ignore certain past events only encourage his readers to contact him to discuss things, and in each situation, the letter itself seems to be the catalyst for the conversation. Arnold says to him, “I wanted to talk to you about Rachel, actually, and about that funny letter you wrote me;” Christian complains, “What a horrid letter you wrote me;” and Julian gushes, “Look, Bradley, what I wanted to say was thank you so much for that letter. I think it’s the most wonderful letter that anybody ever wrote me” (Murdoch 83; 85; 128).

This misreading of letters directly relates to the letter’s impact on events. Instead of clarifying information or producing narrative action, the many letters in the text only create confusion and are ineffective documents, having little or no bearing on the plot of
the novel itself. The catalysts for events in *The Black Prince* are face-to-face meetings and phone calls, instead of the epistolary form. The main development in the plot, Bradley’s love of Julian, begins after the two had been discussing Shakespeare, and Rachel’s phone call to Bradley puts in motion the series of events which ends the narrative and creates the situation which allows Bradley to write his novel.

Lastly, letters in *The Black Prince* appear to be both authentic and an unreliable discourse; as with many letters in modernist fiction, the information in these letters could be suspect and questionable. The letters are used in the narrative to add credibility to Bradley’s version of events, because they are physical records of what other characters said or thought, and because the information in them coincides with events in Bradley’s narrative. For example, Rachel’s letter to Bradley supports Bradley’s account of Rachel’s love for him, which is why he thinks she framed him for Arnold’s murder. The postscripts to Bradley’s writings, however, call into question the world that Bradley has created, and each character’s writings directly contradict certain parts of his story. As Martha C. Nussbaum writes in “‘Faith with Secret Knowledge’: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*”: “All four [postscripts] reject parts of the narrative as fantasy or worse, and all depict Bradley as an unreliable and self-centered narrator” (691).12 Julian Belling’s, once Julian Baffin’s, postscript in particular calls attention to

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12 Nussbaum seems to disregard the information in the postscripts when she writes, “These narratives are so thin, so transparently self-serving, that they just cannot be true: they wear their egotism on their face” (701). Other critics, however, are not so quick to dismiss the last sections of the novel and integrate the conflicting information in them into their understanding of the work as a whole. In her explorations of the parallels between the *The Black Prince* and the Loxias/Apollo and Marsyas myth, Elizabeth Dipple in “*The Black Prince* and the Figure of Marsyas” reconciles the postscripts with the rest of the text by arguing that they force “the reader into a world of multiple points of view” (135). Taken in conjunction with the digressions, and forewords, this diverse nature of the text, the extratextual elements, shows both the “pain and impossibility” of creating art: “The density of the tale constantly works against its clarity, and Bradley Pearson as both self-conscious artist and literary critic is at once achieving art and illustrating its pain and
the letters in the text and asks questions about their existence: “For instance a letter is quoted. Did I write this letter? (Did he keep it?) It seems inconceivable. And the things that I said. (Supposedly). Surely they are the invention of another mind” (Murdoch 400). If Bradley’s versions of events are at all questioned at the end of the novel, the trustworthiness of the information in the letters, and perhaps even their very existence, must be questioned as well. Regardless of the degree of the reliability of the letters, Bradley’s attitude towards them reveals his thoughts about the representation of reality. Heusel argues, “Bradley uses letter writing as a form of exorcism to change reality and as a way of fooling himself into thinking he has dealt with reality. By extension, it seems safe to suspect Bradley of using the same sort of language games throughout his novel to describe reality, thereby distorting it” (133).

McEwans’ Atonement likewise foregrounds issues of interpretation and impact, because letters in this work are both understood and completely misread. As mentioned previously, Robbie and Cecilia make love in the library precisely because Cecilia learns about Robbie’s desires from the wrong draft of a letter she receives from him. Although what she read was not meant for her eyes, Cecilia correctly assumes Robbie’s true feelings for her from what he wrote—feelings that were masked in their face to face interactions. When thirteen-year-old Briony reads the letter, on the other hand, she completely misinterprets its message, an action that has ruinous results. She originally

impossibility: Marsyas always loses, and yet the losing provides the extasis, the human achievement and the ultimate contact with the divine ‘other’ reality” (135). Richard Todd argues in “The Plausibility of The Black Prince” that Bradley is often unaware of his own motives, especially in regard to a possible foot fetish. Dooley also points out that Bradley’s self-image does not always correspond with his actions (136). She reconciles the postscripts with the rest of the text by contending that “On a first reading of the novel it does seem that the nature of reality is being questioned, but on a second reading it is easier to see beyond the assertion of the other characters to a more stable idea of truth and to understand that the distortions of evidence are part of this novel’s contemplation on the nature of reality and perception” (Dooley 137).
had viewed the couple’s scuffle over the vase as a proposal of marriage, but after reading the letter, she believes that the man she considered a part of her family has been, and would continue to be, a threat to her sister: “With the letter something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help” (McEwan 106-7). Briony’s initial misunderstanding of the message in the letter causes her to misinterpret other important events. She confesses her secret to Lola and clings to the older girl’s suggestion that Robbie is a “maniac,” and when she witnesses Robbie and Cecilia’s love making in the library, she thinks he is attacking her (McEwan 112). Even though she cannot make out the face of Lola’s attacker, it was what she read in the letter that causes Briony to immediately assume that Robbie had raped her cousin and to give evidence against him later that eventually sends him to jail. Robbie’s letter is read twice by two different characters, and each reading helps construct two of the main storylines in the novel, Robbie and Cecilia’s love affair and Briony’s accusation of Robbie. This shows the ways the interpretation of a text impacts the events in the narrative.

Robbie’s letter in *Atonement*, along with the other epistles he and Cecilia exchange in Part Two, are presented as authentic documents that record characters’ emotions, but, as in *The Black Prince*, the letters are used to construct a storyworld that is eventually called into question by information in the postscript. In the last pages of the book, it is revealed that an older Briony, now a novelist, has written the previous

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13 Lola eventually marries her rapist, recasting the moral of Richardson’s *Clarissa* (Finney 74). Finney observes, “Lola’s rape, unlike that of *Clarissa*, which leads to her death and Lovelace’s damnation, is the prelude to a long and socially successful marriage cemented” (74).
narrative and that she has deliberately altered the events that took place between her, her sister, and Robbie in her story in order to give Cecilia and Robbie a happier ending in literature than they ever had in life—both were killed within months of each other during the war. Briony, perhaps not so different from the thirteen-year-old character at the beginning of the book, also makes herself a heroine by meeting Robbie and Cecilia face-to-face to discuss her crime, by promising to work to clear Robbie’s legal record, and by apologizing to the couple for her lies long ago. None of these actions ever took place.

The postscript to Atonement, then, produces two different storyworlds. The first is a true storyworld that is supposed to represent the reality of what the characters experienced, and the second is a false storyworld that misrepresents certain events. The correspondence between Robbie and Cecilia in Part Two, which is genuine and enshrined in a museum, works to convince the reader of the novel of the validity of the false storyworld, because Briony, the author, uses information from these letters to paint a world where Robbie and Cecilia live and celebrate their love. One of the best examples of this is the cottage in Wiltshire. In Part Two, Robbie is released from prison early to join the army, and he and Cecilia make plans through their correspondence to meet at a cottage in Wiltshire, which Cecilia would rent from a friend. During Briony’s unexpected visit to her sister in Part Three, a small table with a jar of blue flowers, “harebells perhaps” on top is described as being in Cecilia’s apartment (McEwan 316). Later Cecilia looks for her ration book and says it is in Wiltshire. The displayed

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14 Some reviewers criticized the surprise ending of the novel, arguing that it betrayed the style of the rest of the work. Finney challenges this criticism by proving that Atonement was never written as a “classic realist” text, charting the presence of postmodern conversations with other fictional texts throughout the novel (70). Hidalgo in “Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's Atonement” agrees, arguing that “the metafictional element” of the text lies in “the subtle deployment in part 1 of narrative forms developed by the English novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (85).
wildflowers and the reference to the cottage imply that Robbie and Cecilia have already made a retreat to the country to reconnect after their long separation and that they believe there is a future for them there once the war is over. Briony, the author, used the mention of the cottage that she got from Robbie and Cecilia’s letters and worked it into her novel to make her false storyworld believable, giving her sister and her lover a life they always wanted, but never experienced.

The postscripts at the end of The Black Prince destabilize the world of the novel, and in Atonement, the information in the postscript divides the storyworld of the novel into two parts—Briony’s fantasies and the historical events she distorts. In Possession, the letter is the textual form used to lay the foundation for another diegesis; the correspondence between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte prevents the novel from having a unified storyworld, because the events that are described in the letters of the two poets create another time and place that eventually gains its own autonomy in the text. The setting of the majority of Possession is England in the late 1980s, but the narrative in this setting is strongly influenced by events that took place over a hundred years ago in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Mark M. Henelley, Jr., writes in “‘Repeating Patterns' and Textual Pleasures: Reading (in) AS Byatt's Possession: A Romance,” “Through this correspondence, the postmoderns research and reprise the developing Victorian relationship, developing a corresponding relationship between themselves, one intimately ‘driven’ by the Victorians’ ‘plot or fate’” (442). The only way twentieth-century characters in the novel can attempt to learn about the past is by
reading documents written during the Victorian era, like journals and letters. For example, the letters between Ash and LaMotte, which are included in Chapters 5 and 10, describe how their correspondence became the basis for their romantic relationship. These letters are moments of character narration, in contrast to the omniscient narrator present in the rest of the text, and are physically separated from the text itself because they take on the appearance of the epistolary form and are italicized. There are three times in the book, however, when events from the 1800’s are described by the omniscient narrator, instead of character narrators, and are visually presented like the other chapters in the text. The first time this takes place is in Chapter 15, which describes Ash’s and LaMotte’s tour of Northern England; the second time is in Chapter 25, which begins as Ellen Ash’s journal entries, but transitions to a heterodiegetic chronicle of her days after the death of her husband; and the third time is in the postscript, which describes Ash’s meeting with his daughter on a summer’s day. These moments in the text allow the narrative of the nineteenth century to fade away and become independent from the narrative in the twentieth century. There is no physical record of these events, thus none of the characters in the twentieth century ever learn about them, making each incident separate from, although relevant to, the rest of the action in the book. For example, after Cropper, Hildebrand Ash, Blackadder, Leonora Stern, Beatrice Nest, Euan, Val, Maud, and Roland read LaMotte’s last letter to Ash that he never received,

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15 In “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel,” Dana Shiller argues “Possession calls into question how completely we can ever ‘know’ the past from its textual traces” as part of a larger argument which challenges Fredric Jameson’s “critique of postmodern representations of history” (547; 539).
16 Many critics have argued that when the narrator begins reporting on events in Victorian Britain, it is not initially clear which century she is describing. Sternlieb observes, “Her tendency in these sections is always to reveal slowly and gradually, to disorient us by identifying neither narrative voice, nor the subjects of her narrative, to give us the impression of being intruders on a private moment to which we are given limited access” (149).
they assume that Ash never learned of his only child’s existence. However the postscript tells of this meeting in detail, discussing how the two talked about May Bailey’s carefree childhood and exchanged a crown of daisies for a lock of hair. In this text, the information in the postscript divides the storyworld, and the letter is the tool that creates this partition in the diegesis.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* the letters written by Oskar’s grandparents actually create new storyworlds that ultimately produce three different narratives. Both of Oskar’s grandparents write about their youth, and since they both grew up in Dresden, Germany, their letters describe their life in that city before and after it was firebombed by the allied forces at the end of World War II. In “Why I’m Not Where You Are” dated 4/12/78, Oskar’s grandfather tells his son about what happened to him on the day Dresden was destroyed. That afternoon Thomas Schnell learned that his girlfriend Anna, Oskar’s grandmother’s sister, was pregnant. He is completely overjoyed, kisses her belly before he goes home, and never sees her again. In the evening the bombers come, but the people of Dresden are not afraid; they do not believe that anyone would want to attack their city. However, as he stands outside his bunker Thomas quickly realizes that “something unimaginable was about to happen” (Foer 210): “One hundred planes flew overhead, massive heavy planes, pushing through the night like one hundred whales through water, they dropped clusters of red flares to light up the blackness for whatever was to come next, I was alone on the street, the red flares fell around me, thoughts of them” (Foer 210). In *Possession*, the events that were narrated in the letters eventually laid the foundation for a new diegesis about Victorian England, but in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the narrative told through the letters themselves
is an entrance to a new world. Thomas Schnell’s description of the Dresden bombings helps develop his character, but his experiences are not directly connected to Oskar’s narrative about his search for the lock. Oskar is not even the addressee of the letter; it’s not even clear if he has, or if he will ever, read it. This letter also describes a time and place that is completely alien from Oskar’s existence in New York City, although that city, like Dresden, has also been the victim of an unexpected, completely unjustified attack. This letter is an example of how the epistolary form in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close creates a new storyworld in the novel—one that is both independent from, but thematically related to, those evoked by the central narrative.

After World War II, Oskar’s grandparents both move to America, meet again in New York City, and eventually decide to get married. Even though both of their letters describe this story, the version of the events each grandparent writes about contrasts with the other’s version, further fragmenting the narratives within the text. In his first letter to his son dated 5/21/68, Thomas Schnell explains how he loses his voice and describes his reunion with Oskar’s grandmother, his lover’s sister. According to Thomas, in their first conversation, Oskar’s grandmother avoids any specific mention of the past and talks about her life using several American clichés like, “What a deal!,” “to be frank” and “crummy” (Foer 30). When she finds out that Thomas can’t speak, she begins to cry and writes in his daybook, “Please marry me,” and Thomas’ only response is “Help” (Foer 32-4). Thomas never describes the events that take place after this conversation; his next letter begins talking about his life after the couple was already married. Oskar’s grandmother, on the other hand, has a contradictory story of the events that took place. In her account of their first conversation, she immediately identifies Thomas as her sister
Anna’s boyfriend and asks him if he is from Dresden. Even though he never answers her question, Oskar’s grandmother starts spending time with this man. She writes that before they got married, Thomas Schnell wanted to sculpt her. Oskar’s grandmother would pose for him everyday, but she soon notices that the sculpture Thomas is making is of her sister, whom he loved, instead of her, and it is only after the two make love for the first time that they get married. The events that the letters narrate create other storyworlds that are separate from Oskar’s narrative and even different from each other. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is not just the story about a boy’s life after September 11th; it is three separate stories about three different individuals who are trying to cope with a series of tragedies that have taken place over the last 60 years.

The use letters in The Black Prince, Atonement, Possession, and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close are very unconventional when compared to the use of letters in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and thus challenge the ideas behind the narrative element of the epistolary tradition. In The Black Prince and Atonement, the letters are misread, instead of provoking epiphanies in their readers, and, in continuing some of Joyce’s experiments with narrative in Finnegans Wake, the reading, sending, or receiving of a letter, is no longer an important narrative event. In some of these novels, face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and answering machine messages are what drive the action in the plots. The most important development or change in the narrative element of the epistolary tradition is its gradual progression from unreliability towards incoherence. In Pride and Prejudice and The Moonstone, the letters are important

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17 In The Black Prince, Bradley lives near the Post Office Tower, which is a center of telecommunication in London (Solymar 183).
contributors to the stability of the world of the novel, because they confirm certain
events, provide a more complete narrative, and even fill in hermeneutic gaps. In The
Black Prince, the storyworld is called into question, and in Atonement it is eventually
spilt, but in Possession and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close the letters actually
work to create multiple storyworlds that lessen the novels’ overall coherence.

“We hope you will not be discouraged”: Letters and External Readers

After a traumatic day of nursing the war wounded, Briony Tallis receives a letter
from CC, or Cyril Connolly, editor of the famed literary journal Horizon, to which she
has submitted a novella (Hidalgo 87). The letter rejects her submission, but gives her
several pieces of advice on how to improve her writing. One of the most important
pieces of advice she is given is how to connect to her readers. Connolly’s suggestion is a
reminder that letters in fiction are moments of character narration that perform both the
narrative and the disclosure functions of a character’s telling function. In the late
twentieth and early twenty-first century, many letters in fiction provide more information
to the authorial audience than the narratee, meaning that the disclosure function
dominates the narrative function of the letter in literature and actually become a space for
the authors of these texts to insert metacommentaries about reading into their works.18
Like the letter from the fictional Stephen Hawking in Extremely Loud and Incredibly
Close, the examples I will discuss here work to connect the fictional world with the flesh
and blood world.

18 There are also more traditional uses of the reader element of the epistolary tradition in literature of the
postmodern era. Letters in The Black Prince, and in Possession (most notably the letter that discloses Maud
Bailey’s true lineage) are moments when the disclosure function and narrative function of the character
narration overlap.
In “Narrative Judgments and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative: Ian McEwan's Atonement,” James Phelan sets out to investigate how readers should judge Atonement and how they should judge McEwan after reading his surprise ending (322). He argues that what forms part of our judgment of McEwan’s novel is the aesthetic quality of the work, especially how McEwan prepares us for the unexpected ending. Phelan notes that McEwan lays the groundwork for the ending of Atonement in two main ways: the first is “Briony’s representation of the events that, when seen retrospectively, function as clues to her introduction of fictionalizing elements” and “meta-level communications about [her novel’s] modernist techniques,” especially the letter she receives from Connolly (334). Phelan discusses how Connolly’s comments are not only suggestions about revising her novella, but also critiques of the literary forms used in Atonement, primarily associated with modernist authors, causing readers to question the text’s putative anachronism and revealing the self-reflective nature of the text. Here, I will expand on Phelan’s ideas about the letters’ metacommentary on the text, ultimately proving that CC’s letter is a moment of character narration when the disclosure function dominates the narrative function.

Connolly’s remarks make it clear that what Briony submitted to the Horizon literary magazine is a realization of the piece she wanted to write in the hot summer of 1935. After watching her sister and Robbie have some sort of altercation by the family’s fountain, thirteen-year-old Briony decides to abandon her play and focus on writing fiction, and the piece she has in mind would be one scene written “three times over, from three points of view” (McEwan 38). Briony’s novella is titled “Two Figures by a Fountain,” and is described in the letter as being about three characters’ perspectives on
one central action—the breaking of a vase. Although this literary submission was rejected, a prolepsis at the end of Part I, Chapter 3, implies that Briony does achieve her goal of becoming a famous author: “Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with a simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935” (McEwan 38). This flash forward taken in conjunction with Connolly’s comments present the authorial audience with the possibility that an older Briony, now an author, has written the text they are currently reading. The changes that Connolly encourages Briony to make would transform her draft, which currently resembles Woolf’s The Waves, into a piece of writing whose formal structure would resemble that of Atonement itself. Connolly’s most recurrent piece of advice is to give her writing, “a backbone of a story” (McEwan 295). He writes,

The crystalline present moment is of course a worthy subject in itself, especially for poetry; it allows a writer to show his gifts, delve into mysteries of perception, present a stylized version of thought process, permit the vagaries and unpredictability of the private self to explored and so on. . . . However, such writing can become precious when there is no forward movement. Put the other way around, our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative. Development is required. (McEwan 294-5)

Later in the letter he adds, “Your most sophisticated readers might be well up on the latest Bergsonian theories of consciousness, but I’m sure that they retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense to know what happens” (McEwan 296). Connolly urges Briony to write a work of fiction that combines her desire to represent the
workings of the human mind with a strong plot line, which is an accurate description of *Atonement*. Throughout the novel, focalization and free indirect thought are used to record the characters’ perspectives and internal states. Part One is focalized through Briony, Cecilia, Robbie, and Emily Tallis, Part Two is focalized through Robbie, and Part Three is focalized through Briony. Thus because different sections of the piece are focalized through different characters, *Atonement* does “show separate minds . . . struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive” (McEwan 38). The thread that ties all of these different representations of consciousness together is the narrative of Briony’s false accusation of Robbie. The story of the introduction, climax, and resolution of her crime gives the work a forward motion and keeps the authorial audience interested in reading in order to know what happens. In addition, the questions that Connolly asks in his letter, which were probably meant to give young Briony some ideas for a story, are actually all important narrative moments in *Atonement*.

*If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or accident? Might she innocently expose them somehow to the young woman’s parents perhaps?* (McEwan 295).

Briony’s misunderstanding of a scene does change Robbie and Cecilia’s lives. She is used as a messenger to deliver a letter, and her reading of this private message causes her to fear for the life of her sister. She comes between the man and the woman, because her accusations send Robbie to jail, but the couple’s separation only seems to strengthen their love and their resolve to be together. Briony shows the letter Robbie wrote to Cecilia to the police, exposing them, though not innocently, to the Tallis family and the authorities.
The narrative in Part One of *Atonement* not only suggests that Briony followed CC’s general advice, but that she specifically highlighted parts of her story in response to the questions he posed in his letter.

Connolly’s letter not only prepares the authorial audience for the revelation that Briony is the author of *Atonement*, but it should also prepare them for the postscript where it is revealed that Briony misrepresented actual events to create her story, because when compared to the account of events in Part One of *Atonement*, Connolly’s letter highlights several incidents where Briony appeared to change factual details. I’ve already discussed how Briony’s journal misrepresents aspects of her authentic subjective experience, and the comments in CC’s letter indicate that Briony’s creative license extends to her writing as well. He asks, “Wouldn’t it help you if the watching girl did not actually realize that the vase had broken? It would be all the more of a mystery to her that the woman submerges herself” (McEwan 295). When the thirteen-year-old Briony witnesses the argument between Robbie and Cecilia, she does see how the vase got broken, just Cecilia’s picking it up as she leaves the fountain; the destruction of the vase is described by the heterodiegetic narrator of the text. But the heterodiegetic narrator of the text was created by Briony, so Connolly’s observations demonstrate that Briony, the author, knew about the breaking of the vase, because she wrote about it in her piece from the perspective of an omniscient narrator—Briony has changed the representation of her own experience as a child in Chapter 3, Part One of *Atonement*. The material the vase is made out of is also changed in Briony’s manuscript to create more drama. In Chapter 2 of Part One, the vase is described as being made out of Meissen porcelain, but Connolly’s remarks about it in his letter criticize Briony’s choice of material for the vase as being
“too priceless to take outdoors,” because it appears that in her novella the vase is made out of Ming porcelain (McEwan 295). Lastly, as described in Chapter 3, Cecilia takes off all her outer clothes and dives into the fountain to retrieve the pieces that broke off the vase. Young Briony yearns to write about the incident by saying that, “She could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it, meeting the challenge by refusing to condemn her sister’s shocking near-nakedness, in daylight, right by the house” (McEwan 39).

Connolly’s letter reveals that Briony did not rise to the challenge of her original conception of the work in the draft she sent to Horizon, because in her story the woman is fully clothed when she enters the water. Not yet having developed a backbone, Briony seems to have changed some important details about what she saw for her art.

Phelan sums up Briony’s efforts in Atonement by saying “her intentions are good but her execution leaves a lot to be desired” and discusses McEwan’s transgression by arguing that the groundwork he lays in the novel for the ending is his successful attempt at a reconciliation with the reader (332; 335). Phelan’s identification and my subsequent expansion on the ways that Connolly’s letter prepares the reader for the ending of the novel also highlight how the disclosure function is more prominent than the narrator function in this letter, alerting readers to the fact that Briony is not only an author, but an unreliable narrator as well. Connolly notes that his rejection letter to Briony is unusually long, and although it is addressed to the young writer, the information in it is meant more for the authorial audience than for herself.

Connolly’s letter can be seen as a guide for the authorial audience on how to read Atonement. His observations and suggestions about Briony’s first draft of her novella should remind readers about the prolepses in the texts that imply Briony has become a
successful author and encourage them to question some of the events in the story. Connolly’s letter cautions us to be sensitive to the details that we read and warns us to not completely trust the source of our information about the world of the novel, the heterodiegetic narrator. Letters in Possession and The Black Prince are also metacommendaries by authors that are meant to show the authorial audience how to read the texts themselves. In Possession, when Maud and Roland are finally given the opportunity to read Ash’s and LaMotte’s correspondence, they decide, after some debate, to read each poet’s letters separately, take notes, and then compare the content. At first Roland objects, saying that they should read the letters in the order they were written, but in the end succumbs to Maud’s request. The narrator notes, “He pointed out that by Maud’s system, they would lose any sense of the development of the narrative and Maud retorted robustly that they lived in a time which valued narrative uncertainty” (Byatt 144). However, when the poets’ correspondence is included in the text for external readers to read in Chapter 10, the letters are presented in the manner the correspondence proceeded, so that the reader is exposed to Ash’s inquires and LaMotte’s subsequent replies. Throughout Possession, Byatt seems to be critical of some strands of postmodern literary theory. One example of her disapproval is her decision to make one of the villains in the book, Fergus Wolff, a deconstructionist who writes about French, instead of English, literature. The chronological presentation of the letters in the text, which allows a narrative to be created despite Maud’s assertions, is another example of Byatt’s apparent skepticism towards some fields of modern day academic scholarship and her determination to show the reader the proper way to read literature and even letters.
Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* is also a cautionary tale about reading novels. Despite his frustrations with his friends’ interpretations of his epistolary discourse, Bradley is also guilty of misreading letters; he completely misinterprets the letter Julian sends him from France. Julian’s letter is rambling and repetitive, but the main message of her missive is clear—she does not regret what happened between her and Bradley, but she does not have romantic feelings for him anymore, and she cannot see how their relationship could have ever survived. After reading her letter, however, Bradley comes to a very different conclusion about what Julian is trying to say. He believes that Julian’s letter is a cry for help and that she is being held prisoner by her father in Europe. He assumes that Arnold is watching her write every word, so her letter is actually written in code. He also suspects that her failure to end the letter is a sign that she was actually trying to insert some sort of SOS in the text, but that she didn’t get a chance. Using his powers of deduction, Bradley thinks he has figured out where Julian actually is: “‘Snow and Ice,’ to which she had drawn attention, patently meant Venice. The Italian for ‘snow’ is ‘neve,’ and together with the reference to ‘Italian words,’ the anagram was obvious. And in ‘topsy turvy’ language a little place in the mountains clearly meant a large place by the sea” (Murdoch 364). He completely overreads her letter, making connections between ideas that don’t seem to exist and believing her descriptions of her future location to be written in a type of code, when there is no evidence to support either inference. Critics have argued Bradley’s review of Arnold Baffin’s latest book is actually a commentary by Murdoch about reviewers’ and critics’ responses to her novels; Bradley’s reaction to Julian’s letter should be viewed in a similar manner; Murdoch is cautioning her readers not to look for things in her work that don’t exist.
Connolly begins his letter by telling Briony, “We hope you will not be discouraged.” In the modernist era, the narrative function sometimes trumped the disclosure function, as in Helen’s letters in *Howards End*, perhaps discouraging the authorial audience because this made it hard to glean information from the correspondence they read. In *Atonement*, *Possession*, and *The Black Prince*, included letters in fiction are used in a new way in regards to the authorial audience. The disclosure function is dominant over the narrative function, allowing more direct communication between implied authors and implied readers, guiding the reader’s interpretation of the text. In one example from *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, however, a letter deliberately blocks the flow of information from author to reader, frustrating our attempts to learn about events before they happen, but encouraging us to keep reading the novel. The last letter written by Thomas Schnell Senior dated September 11, 2003 is addressed to Thomas’ son, but is written after he died. In this letter, Thomas tells his dead son how he and his grandson dig up Thomas’ son’s (Oskar’s father’s) empty grave. But in order for readers of the novel to learn about this event from Oskar’s perspective, Safran Foer blurs the typesetting in his novel. Thomas is about to talk about his and Oskar’s adventures in the cemetery in his letter, but he runs out of paper on which to write. He has to write his words closer and closer together, and eventually he writes words one on top of each other so they all smudge together, turning his message to his dead son into nothing but black space. This breakdown of the typesetting keeps information from the authorial audience. Now we are forced to wait until the end of the novel to find out what happens to Oskar, his grandfather, and Gerald the limo driver at Thomas Schnell Junior’s grave.
“The limit of possible communication”: Communication in the Postmodern Era

In a letter to Christabel LaMotte, which was never sent, Randolph Henry Ash writes, “I tell you Christabel—you who will never read this letter, like so many others, for it has passed the limit of possible communication . . .” (Byatt 496). The letters in The Black Prince, Possession, Atonement, and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close also explore the limits “of possible communication.” Letters in these novels attempt to reclaim the letter as a personal document, hoping to return to the ideas behind the character element of the epistolary tradition. Instead letters only re-emphasize the ways in which language complicates representations of the subjective experience. The epistolary form also forges new connections with different states of being in these postmodern texts, because the letters in the novels in this chapter create new storyworlds, dividing the diegesis instead of adding to the coherence of the novel, and focusing on the communication that takes place between readers and authors rather than between characters. The difficulty of writing, the letters that fragment the narrative, and letters whose main message is not necessarily intended for characters all suggest that communication in these postmodern novels is not successful. In addition, the act of physically sending and receiving letters is fraught with problems: the overabundance of emotions in letters causes them not to be sent, and physicality of the letter itself, which in previous eras was viewed as a positive characteristic of the form, now causes missives to be intercepted, or even destroyed.

In the above example, Ash never sent his letter to LaMotte because it lacked any mediation between his internal state and the words he wrote on the page, so it sat in his
desk and was only discovered by his wife after his death. Thomas Schnell also has written many letters to his son that he never sent, which are self described as “Things I wasn’t able to tell him,” implying that the stories and emotions in the letters were too personal and too powerful to be shared with their intended recipient (Foer 322).

In *Howards End*, Helen Schlegel ends all of her letters to her sister by saying “Burn this,” although it is doubtful that any of her correspondence was actually destroyed (Forster 3). In fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the physical nature of the letter itself, such as the sheets of paper and the envelope, actually puts letters at risk and makes them more susceptible to interception. In the days before her husband’s death, Ellen Ash receives a note from Christabel LaMotte, asking her to deliver a message to the terminally ill poet. Ellen does not want to disturb her husband with any mention of his tumultuous past. She never opens LaMotte’s letter and decides to bury it with her own love letters in the poet’s grave at the Hodershall Parish Church. Victorian scholars discover this letter in the twentieth century, but Ash never read the information inside about his daughter and grandson. Although the postscript tells us that Ash actually met his daughter and took a lock of her hair, LaMotte never received an

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19 LaMotte’s letter is not the only one that gets stolen—connecting *Possession* to Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” Thelma J. Shimm writes in “What's in a Word? Possessing A. S. Byatt's Meronymic Novel,” “The novel is filled with 'purloined' letters, from Roland’s first irresistible impulse to take Ash’s drafts of a first letter to Christabel to Mortimer Cropper’s scheme to rob the grave of Ash’s wife Ellen of the final letter of that correspondence” (175).

20 Like Ellen Ash, Thomas decides to bury these letters, but he chooses to put them in his son’s empty coffin, an action that harkens back to nineteenth-century ideas about letters and bodies. Letters were often directly associated with the person who wrote them and often were a replacement for the body of the letter writer. In Beth Hewitt’s book *Correspondence and American Literature*, she notes: “there is no essential difference between the letter writer’s body and her letter,” and discusses how, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne used to kiss his fiancée’s letters in her absence (1). In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* this idea is taken to a new extreme where the body of the letter’s recipient is physically replaced with letters that were never sent to him. When the letters full of “Things that can’t be said” are placed in Oskar’s father’s grave, his decisions not to tell his family he loved them before he died is condemned in the text.
answer to her letter, never knowing if Ash forgave her and if he learned about the existence and true identity of their child. After LaMotte’s letter is read out loud, Beatrice Nest comments on the tragedy surrounding the failed exchange of messages, “She wrote all that for no one. She must have waited for an answer—and none can have come” (Byatt 547). In Atonement, Briony’s curiosity causes her to intercept Robbie’s message to Cecilia by reading the letter he wrote her, an action that has disastrous consequences for all the parties involved.

At the end of The Black Prince, when Bradley rushes over to the Baffin residence and finds Arnold dead, he immediately tries to make the murder scene look more like an accident. He wipes the poker clean of her fingerprints and burns a letter that Arnold had addressed to him. In this letter Arnold confesses his love for Bradley’s ex-wife Christian, expressing how his feelings for her are different than his other affairs. Bradley assumes, probably correctly, that his giving this letter to Rachel is what instigated her attack on his friend, so he destroys it in an effort to protect Rachel from being suspected by the police.21 His actions completely backfire because he becomes the main murder suspect. The letter that he burnt would have revealed that Rachel had a motive for the crime and saved him from jail.

The vulnerability of the physical nature of the letter and its ability to blur the boundaries between private and public space also generates depictions of letters as being almost sinister (Hewitt 8). In The Black Prince, Bradley Pearson is sentenced to life in prison for the murder of Arnold Baffin largely because of a threatening letter he wrote to

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21 Despite Bradley’s silence on this subject in his postscript, Nussbaum argues that Bradley’s freedom from the ego is what allows him to take the blame for Arnold’s murder and that he does it for Julian’s sake (703).
the novelist. A letter is also used as evidence to convict Robbie Turner of rape. In Possession, Ellen Ash is obsessed with images of people rummaging through Randolph Henry Ash’s personal affects after his death, as it was rumored they did with Dickens’ papers. She has worked hard her whole marriage to paint a particular portrait about her and her husband’s life, and takes whatever actions she sees as necessary to preserve that account; this is why she burns Ash’s drafts of letters to LaMotte and buries LaMotte’s letters to him. Finally in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close the letters in the text are not just burned, but become a fuel for conflagration. Oskar’s grandmother had the opposite tendency of her grandson when she was younger—she strove to collect letters from others instead of writing them. After receiving a letter from a convict in a Turkish Prison, she decided to ask everyone she knows to write her a letter. She said she had over a hundred letters and she was “always moving them around, trying to make connections” (Foer 79). But as she begins her new life in New York after the fire bombing of Dresden, but she can’t help wonder if her need for personal communication from others only fed the fires which destroyed her life: “Sometimes I would think about those hundred letters laid across my bedroom floor. If I hadn’t collected them, would our house have burned less brightly?” (Foer 83). Oskar has similar concerns about paper at the end of the book as he meditates on his father’s death: “I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning” (Foer 325). The very physical material of the letter seems to have transformed into something to be feared.

In all of these texts, the act of exchanging messages is riddled with the possibility of failure, but letters, despite their flaws, present a glimmer of hope that authentic communication and even sincere relationships can exist, at least temporarily. In
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, the day Oskar decides to dig up his dad’s empty coffin, he gets a letter from “Stephen Hawking” that the scientist actually wrote himself.

I will briefly summarize the fictional Stephen Hawking’s letter. It begins “Dear Oskar Schnell” and opens as Hawking describes the many letters he has received from Oskar. Although Hawking’s letter is clearly written, well organized, and very articulate, he talks about how difficult writing a letter can be when he notes that “the more of yourself you gave the more daunting my task [letter writing] became” (Foer 304).

Hawking then discusses some recent events in his life; he has just had surgery and is in the country at a friend’s house trying to recover. Hawking says that during his recovery he is “physically and emotionally depleted,” but instead of sulking, he would finally reply to Oskar’s letters (Foer 304). Like the letter writers in West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, Oskar is writing to Hawking because he is looking for some answers to the questions he is dealing with in his life and because he is getting some sort of emotional release from writing that he is not getting from his interactions with his family, his friends, or his therapist. But unlike in Miss Lonelyhearts, the person Oskar writes to not only attempts to answer his questions, but encourages him to continue to develop his talents. In his letter, Hawking answers the question that Oskar initially wrote: “You asked me in your first letter if you could be my protégé. I don’t know about that, but I would be happy to have you join me in Cambridge for a few days” (Foer 304). He says that Oskar has a “bright future in the sciences” and tells him that he would be happy “to do anything possible to facilitate such a path” (Foer 304). He continues to try to directly answer the questions Oskar has asked. He says, “In your fifth letter you asked, ‘What if I never stop inventing?’ That question has stuck with me” (Foer 305). Ever since his father died,
Oskar has been inventing things that could have saved his father’s life, like birdseed shirts or buildings that moved up and down while a person stayed on the ground level. But Oskar cannot ever learn the exact details of his father’s death, so he is always obsessively inventing things in order to prepare for all sorts of contingencies. Oskar thinks that his constant inventing is somehow detrimental, but in his letter Hawking affirms the need for new ideas and the necessity of creating things that can preserve life.

_I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that the vast majority of the universe is composed of dark matter. The fragile balance depends on things we’ll never be able to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. Life itself depends on them. What’s real? What isn’t real? Maybe those aren’t the right questions to be asking. What does life depend on? I wish I had made things for life to depend on. What if you never stop inventing? Maybe you’re not inventing at all._ (Foer 305)

Hawking also discloses one of his deepest secrets to Oskar in his letter: “I wish I were a poet. I’ve never confessed that to anyone, and I’m confessing it to you because you’ve given me reason that I can trust you” (Foer 305). Oskar’s letters have created a unique bond between him and Stephen Hawking, giving Hawking a reason to trust this precocious nine year old even though he hasn’t met him. Stephen Hawking ends his letter to Oskar with a call for correspondence and an exchange of ideas, a written relationship based on personal communication and reciprocity—he wants to tell Oskar more about his life and wants to hear more from him. The last sentences of the letter paint a serene image of morning in the English countryside and express the hope that Hawking’s vision is actually a shared vision.

_There is more I want to tell you, and more I want to hear from you. It’s a shame we live on different continents. One shame of many. It’s so beautiful this hour. The sun is low, the shadows are long, the air is cold_
and clean. You won’t be awake for another five hours, but I can’t help feeling we are sharing this clear and beautiful morning.

Your friend,
Stephen Hawking (Foer 305)

The Stephen Hawking who writes back to Oskar is only a fictional character, but his letter describes an ideal correspondence and suggests that genuine communication between individuals is actually possible. His letter is also a turning point for communication in the text, because after Oskar receives it, he and the rest of the members of his family begin to try to tell each other how they feel and talk about the past.

Throughout the novel the characters have struggled to confront tragedy and have avoided painful topics in their conversations with each other, but after this moment, they appear to have a new attitude towards communication, an attitude that is best summed up when Oskar says to his mother, “You don’t have to make it up so I won’t worry” (Foer 325).

In Possession, the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte also suggests that true communication can take place and create personal relationships—at least temporarily. Ash and LaMotte fell in love with each other through each other’s writing, and examining sections of their correspondence in more detail shows that the poets’ letters are initially similar to the letters written by Clifford Chatterley and Oliver Mellors in Lady Chatterley’s Lover; they are more like essays than personal utterances.

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22 As Lucile Desblache points out in “Penning Secrets: Presence and Essence of the Epistolary Genre in AS Byatt’s Possession,” there are also eight letters included in the text written by twentieth-century characters (92). She argues that letters are the main method of communicating between the different scholars and are a “formal means of communication,” an “instrument of contact which avoids direct confrontation,” a note that accompanies “enclosed documents,” and last attempts at sending messages (Desblache 92). Even though the majority of these letters could be classified as business communication, they also contain personal messages. For example, the acceptance letters Roland receives from different universities all include direct comments to him from the readers of his applications, letting him know how much they enjoyed his essay.
because they discuss and debate general topics and rely on metaphor to illustrate ideas, but gradually adopt a more personal rhetoric that cause the two writers to meet face to face and eventually fall in love.

The first letter from Ash is the finished product of what Roland Mitchell, improvised university researcher, initially read in the London Library.

Dear Miss LaMotte,

It was a great pleasure to talk to you at dear Crabb’s breakfast party. Your perception and wisdom stood out through the babble of undergraduate wit, and even surpassed our host’s account of the finding of Wieland’s bust. May I hope that you too enjoyed our talk—and may I have the pleasure of calling on you? I know you live quietly, but I would be very quiet—I only want to discuss Dante and Shakespeare, and Wordsworth and Coleridge and Goethe and Schiller and Webster and Ford and Sir Thomas Browne et hoc genus omne, not forgetting, of course, Christabel LaMotte and the ambitious Fairy Project. Do answer this. You know, I think, how much a positive answer would give pleasure to

Yours very sincerely
Randolph Henry Ash (Byatt 97-8)²³

Ash’s first letter in this correspondence is very formal, but lighthearted. He references the conversation that he and LaMotte had at a breakfast party and voices his desire to meet with her in person to continue talking about literature. His long list of proposed topics of conversation is playful, and the overall tone of his letter is one of interest, but also of distance and caution—he is careful not to offend his addressee by his requests.

LaMotte is also very self-deprecating in her response to Ash’s letter, downplaying her rhetorical skills by characterizing her “brilliance” as being only a reflection of Ash’s (Byatt 97). Her letter is a compromise of sorts—she does not want to meet with Ash face to face, but wants to continue their conversation, so she writes him a response, enclosing

²³ Desblache makes a very interesting observation about the correspondence in Possession in her article—none of the letters in the novel have dates, except the drafts of letters that Roland finds in the library (90).
a poem, in the hopes that a productive correspondence between the two will develop: “I am a creature of my Pen, Mr Ash, my Pen is the best of me, and I enclose a Poem, in earnest of my great goodwill towards you. Now would you not rather have a Poem, however imperfect, than a plate of cucumber sandwiches, however even, however delicately salted, however exquisitely fine cut? You know you would and so would I” (Byatt 97). This witty reply matches Ash’s earlier good humor, and the enclosed poem encourages both letter writers to discuss aesthetic philosophies instead of personal feelings.

The next couple of letters continue the jocular tone of the first two, but soon the two Victorian authors begin to use their letters to discuss more serious topics such as poetics, religion, crises of faith, and the afterlife. For example, Ash says that he is afraid that his discussions and suggestions for LaMotte’s work will overly influence her poetry, and she reassures him that it is not so. She then explains to him her need to write, which is extremely personal because she has only shared her work with three other people:

You understood my very phrase—the Life of Language. You understand—in my life Three—and Three alone have glimpsed—that the need to set down words—what I see, so—but words too, words mostly—words have been all my life, all my life—this need is like the Spider’s need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she must spin out—the silk is her life, her home, her safety—her food and drink too . . .  (Byatt 198)

In the next letter, Ash opens by saying, “My dear Friend,” and adds in the first paragraph, “I may call myself your friend, may I not? For my true thoughts have spent more time in your company than in anyone else’s” (Byatt 198). Thus LaMotte’s
discussion about her desire to write takes their correspondence to a new level of intimacy.

In one of his last letters in Chapter 10, Ash admits that he loves LaMotte’s words as much as he loves her:

*I know it is usual in these circumstances to protest—“I love you for yourself alone”—“I love you essentially”—and as you imply, my dearest, to mean by “you essentially”—life hands and eyes. But you must know—that it is not so—dearest I love your soul and with that your poetry—the grammar and stopping and hurrying syntax of your quick thought—quite as much as essentially you . . .* (Byatt 219)

In *Atonement*, Robbie attempts to conceal his true feelings in his letter, but his emotions overtake him and he freely expresses his love and lust for Cecilia. He was afraid she would be offended if she knew the extent of his emotions, but it is the moment where he completely articulates his thoughts that both brings them together and pulls them apart. Even though she receives the wrong letter, Cecilia gets the gist of Robbie’s message, and when he comes to the house for dinner, she induces him to come into the library where the two make love in the corner, pressed up against the bookshelves.

In many modernist novels fact-to-face meetings produced an accurate exchange of messages, but in these texts the letter appears to be the space where moments of communication take place, especially when compared to other forms of media or other methods of communicating. When they are in each other’s company, Robbie and Cecilia completely misinterpret each other’s actions in *Atonement*, until Cecilia reads Robbie’s letter—even the wrong letter is able to express Robbie’s true feelings for the eldest Tallis sister better than any conversation they had previously had. After Robbie is released from prison, their interchanges once again are awkward and strained: “In their coded exchanges they had drawn close, but how artificial that closeness seemed now as they
embarked on their small talk, their helpless catechism of polite query and response. As the distance opened up between them, they understood how far they had run ahead of themselves in their letters” (McEwan 193). The idea that the two lovers had “run ahead of themselves in their letters” could also describe Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte; they also comment how their face to face meetings lack the familiarity they feel when writing. Ash notes:

And did you find—as I did—how curious, as well as very natural it was that we should be so shy with each other, when in a papery way we knew each other so much better? I felt I have always known you, and yet I search for polite phrases and conventional enquires—you are more mysterious in your presence (as I suppose most of us may be) than you seem to be in ink and scribbled symbols. (Perhaps we all are so. I cannot tell). (Byatt 209)

LaMotte echoes his sentiments: “It is most true as you say, that embodied—I had almost writ confrontation—conversation—unsettles the letters. I know not—what to write. My pen is reluctant. I am overawed by your voice—in truth—by Presence—however taken” (Byatt 210). LaMotte’s and Ash’s relationship fails when they stop corresponding, because when they are together in person do they fully realize that the love they have for each other does not have a place in their present lives. Bradley Person receives and makes several telephone calls in The Black Prince, but most of the phone calls are made because there is an emergency, as when Priscilla tries to kill herself, or to arrange social meetings. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Oskar’s dad leaves six messages for his family on their answering machine while he is trapped inside one of the Twin Towers. Oskar’s dark secret in the book is that he was home when his dad called and left the sixth message, but does not pick up the phone and talk to him because he was too afraid of
what his dad might say. Thomas Schnell Junior only had one opportunity to leave his family a message on their answering machine, and he decided tell them that he was OK although that was a lie.

The epistolary form in the early twentieth century was associated, and in the cases of Woolf and Joyce directly identified, with aesthetics and the process of composing literature. In The Black Prince, Atonement, and Possession, this trend continues, reinforcing the connections between letters and art. In the last chapters of Jane Eyre, the language of the novel strongly resembles the language of letters, and a similar phenomenon can be seen in Iris Murdoch’s The Black Prince, where certain characteristics of the overall text are analogous to those of epistolary discourse. In his forward, Bradley describes his attempt in his novel to write about the past without any knowledge of the future. He says, “I shall in telling it adopt the modern technique of narration, allowing the narrating consciousness to pass like a light along its series of present moments, aware of the past, unaware of what is to come” (Murdoch 3). Bradley’s style of narration in the text is comparable to Richardson’s idea of “writing to the minute,” where the events are recorded right after they happen and characters have no knowledge of the future. The most prominent similarity between the language of the epistolary form and Murdoch’s novel is the frequent address of a specific person, namely the mysterious PA Loxias, who Murdoch later identified as the god Apollo (Nussbaum 703). Bradley dedicates his work of art to this mysterious person, calling him, “my dearest friend, my comrade and my teacher” and several times throughout the novel, Bradley specifically directs his comments to this person with the invocation of “dear
reader” (Murdoch 11). For example, after the arrival of his sister Priscilla, Bradley
digresses from his narrative to write a personal message to the editor of his text: “Perhaps
at this point in my story, my dear friend, I may be allowed to pause and speak to you
directly. Of course the whole of what I write here, and perhaps somehow unconsciously
my whole oeuvre, has been a communication addressed to you” (Murdoch 71). As
previously mentioned, the interchange of the “I” and the “you” and the presence of a
specific addressee is what separates the letter from other forms of media such as journals,
memos, and rhetorical essays (Altman 118). So at these moments, the text almost
becomes a personal letter to the man who inspired Bradley to create his work of art. In
addition, the time Bradley spends in prison because of the evidence in a letter leads to a
type of suffering that can engender creativity. As Heusel argues, “Bradley suffers
enough to see clearly the reality that his editor, Loxias, insists on: the artist produces art
through suffering” (177).

Although it does not have the characteristics of the epistolary discourse like The
Black Prince, the main text of McEwan’s Atonement can be seen as a letter. At the end
of the last chapter, Briony promises Robbie and Cecilia that she would write a letter to
her parents, convincing them that her earlier accusations were false. The postscript
reveals that Briony never visited her sister and her lover and she never made any attempt
to reverse her testimony or proclaim Robbie innocent of the crime. What she calls her last

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24 Nussbaum argues that the real love story in the novel is between Bradley and his publisher: “Only in the
work of art has Bradley finally shaken off fog and anxiety; and his love of his teacher and friend Loxias is,
in the end, the enrobing love story in the work (705). Heusel argues that the introduction of the Loxias
character who rises “above the novelist’s world” is a “postmodern technique” (128).
novel, however, can be viewed as the letter she told the two lovers that she would write, a letter that would tell the truth, name the guilty party, and explain why exactly Briony lied so many years ago.

In Possession, Roland Mitchell’s experience reading the letters, and eventually following in the footsteps of poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, seems to release his own inner artistic abilities. Unemployed and living with Maud Bailey, he begins to write words down that “resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory. He had hopes—more, intimations of imminence—of writing poems, but so far had got no further than lists” (Byatt 467). After returning to his flat, learning that his landlady died, and receiving several job offer letters, Roland rereads one of Ash’s poems, not as a literary critic, but as a reader who can see the imagery in the work, hear Ash’s voice, and appreciate the beauty created from different combinations of words. He heads out to the garden that he was once forbidden to enter and is confronted with many hungry cats who have not eaten since the landlady died. The view of the night, the garden, and the cats releases the torrent of words that have been building up inside Roland and he suddenly begins to write poetry in his head.

Tonight he began to think of words, words that come from a well in him, lists of words that arranged themselves into poems, “The Death Mask,” “The Fairfax Wall,” “A Number of Cats.” He could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn’t yet know, but which was his own. The poems were not careful observations, nor yet incantations, nor yet reflections on life and death, though they had elements of all these. He added another “Cats’ Cradle,” as he saw he had things to say which he could say about the ways shapes came and made themselves. . . . an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real. (Byatt 515-6)
In the phrase, “You’ve got mail” the word “mail” both refers to conventional paper letters that are delivered by a postman, and electronic mail that instantly travels from one computer to another. The functions of letters in some postmodern era fiction reflect these two contrasting connotations of the word “mail.” In regards to the character element of the epistolary tradition, the letter harkens back to its past, by once again trying, but failing, to clearly represent the subjective experience. But in regards to the narrative and reader elements of the epistolary tradition, the letter looks towards the future, articulating contemporary literary theory’s ideas about levels of diegesis and levels of reality.
CONCLUSION

“There’s something stuck here”: The Future of the Letter in Fiction

In order to determine how letters are used in twentieth-century fiction, we have compared the functions of modern and postmodern letters with the original uses of the letter in the eighteenth-century epistolary novel and its nineteenth-century successor. Putting the letter in this particular context allowed us to see some of the ways the uses of the epistolary form has changed over the last 200 years. To gain a better understanding of the letter’s relationship to twentieth-century literature, let’s examine the letter in the context of the two major literary movements of the last 100 years, modernism and postmodernism. This will help us draw some general conclusions about the use of the epistolary form in the twentieth century with the hope of answering the first question I posed in the introduction: why are letters used in twentieth century fiction?

In Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale argues that the dominant, or “focusing component,” of modernist fiction is “epistemological” (9).¹ Thus the major themes in modernist fiction center on questions surrounding knowledge, for example: “What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what

¹ The idea of the dominant, which McHale uses to trace historical change in twentieth-century fiction, was introduced by the Russian Formalists. Jurii Tynjanov probably invented the concept, but Roman Jakobson popularized it when he discussed it in one of his lectures (McHale 6).
degree of reliability?; how does the object of knowledge change as it passes on from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable?” (McHale 9). The use of letters in fiction detailed in Chapter 2 articulates some of the concerns about the transfer and limits of knowledge expressed in these questions. The information in many letters in modernist fiction is not reliable because the accounts of events narrated by heterodiegetic narrators contrast with those given by characters, and these discrepancies highlight the limits of what other characters know. For example, as discussed earlier, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the letter that Connie writes to Clifford asking for a divorce is not an accurate account of events, because she has implied in her letter that she is leaving her husband for a close friend, when in reality she wants to marry the gamekeeper Mellors. Her deliberate misrepresentation of events highlights how information is easily altered in order to restrict others’ knowledge about a particular situation. In addition, Clifford’s reaction to her letter exposes how little he actually knew about his wife’s life. He seemed unaware of the fact that his wife was having an affair and is shocked to learn that she is so unhappy at Wragby that she wants to leave him. The included letter in fiction was traditionally used to enhance the knowledge of the characters in the text, as in *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Moonstone*, but in the early twentieth century, the letter foregrounds the uncertainties, unreliability, and limits of the knowledge of the storyworld.

The inability of language to describe the reality of the modern era is another cornerstone of modernist aesthetics and a central theme in literature of the early twentieth century. As Richard Sheppard posits in “The Crisis of Language,” “Rightly or wrongly, many modern writers feel that ordinary discourse is cripplingly deficient. Words get in the way of reality” (328). The narrator of *Jacob’s Room*’s comments on the language of
letters in Chapter VIII demonstrates that the modernists’ loss of faith in language also extends to epistolary discourse. The narrator’s observations about the condition of the language of letters begin by suggesting that people could try to use letters to build friendships, to find company on life’s journey. But she later abandons this idea, arguing that even the great writers of the past whose literary works have become timeless cannot write letters that adequately express how they feel because epistolary discourse has been completely exhausted.

Byron wrote letters. So did Cowper. For centuries the writing-desk has contained sheets fit precisely for the communications of friends. Masters of language, poets of long ages, have turned from the sheet that endures to the sheet that perishes, pushing aside the tea-tray, drawing close to the fire (for letters are written when the dark presses round a bright red cave), and addressed themselves to the task of reaching, touching, penetrating the individual heart. Were it possible! But words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street. (Woolf 80)

The modernists’ attitude towards epistolary discourse explains why characters continually struggle to express themselves when they write letters. In Howards End for example, Margaret wants to write Henry a letter assuring him that she is dedicated to their marriage, but epistolary discourse is unable to clearly represent the complexities of her subjective state. She constantly finds fault with the sentences she tries to write; the very words that she puts on the page ring false and have the potential to misrepresent her true emotions.

Art and artists are prominent motifs and figures in modernist fiction, perhaps because of the increasing debate about the status of the novel as art that took place during this time. As Stevenson writes in Modernist Fiction, art and literature “begin to figure very frequently, in one way or another, as central subjects and concerns” in the writings
of the early twentieth century (155). This concern with poetics, as we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, extends to the epistolary form, making it a *mise en abyme* of fiction. The resulting relationship between letters and art encouraged modernist authors to experiment with the epistolary form, and the innovative uses of letters in literature was an attempt to revitalize the language that they saw as being depleted.

The literature from the latter half of the twentieth century is governed by a very different set of concerns that are also embodied in letters in literature. McHale identifies the dominant of postmodern fiction as “ontological,” characterizing the shift from modernism to postmodernism as a shift from “problems of knowing to problems of modes of being” (10). Postmodernist fiction deals with such questions as: “What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?” (McHale 10). This construction of postmodernist fiction as being dominated by ontological concerns is reflected in the ways letters are used in Chapter 4. Letters in postmodern fiction are often bridges that span different metalevels of a text: the Stephen Hawking that Oskar Schnell writes to is a character in a novel based on a flesh and blood astrophysicist; letters in both *Possession* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* actually work to create new storyworlds that fracture the coherence of those novels; and *Atonement*, *The Black Prince*, and *Possession* all contain letters whose primary function is to send messages to external readers rather
than to characters. All of these examples emphasize the different modes of being inherent in these particular texts and foreground how the epistolary form has changed in order to be used in this different textual environment.

The use of the epistolary form in twentieth-century fiction reflects the major principles of the modern and postmodern literary movements. Because its uses can be adapted to express different theories about art and literature, the included letter is a versatile form; as has been showcased in this project, letters in fiction often become spaces where experiments with language are conducted, enabling the included letter to be used in a variety of new ways. But while the letter in fiction is becoming a general form, whose use allows authors to articulate different aesthetic philosophies, the letter in the flesh and blood world is becoming a specific form, a way of communicating only in certain situations; or put another way, the number of ways the letter is used in fiction is constantly expanding, while the number of ways the letter is being used in real life is diminishing. As mentioned in the introduction, when new media are introduced to a media ecology environment, older forms of media “differentiate” themselves—they become specialized and are used in specific ways that separate them from newer forms of communication. Differentiation allows different forms of media to coexist in the same environment. The epistolary form is still being used in the twentieth century, but with developments in new technology it is only used in certain situations. For example, people send email because it is a faster and more convenient way of sending a message, especially when they sit at their computers all day. However, in certain situations they send letters, like a thank you note for example, because it is more traditional and because they hope the time they put into writing shows their appreciation for a gift. The letter in
fiction, then, is slowly being separated from its real world counterpart. One of the reasons letters were used in fiction in the eighteenth century was because they were a prominent part of the media ecology, but in the twentieth century, letters are used in literature because they are not part of the media ecology, because their relationship with actual media is dissolving. They are less mimetic objects than tropes that can be used to comment on communication practices. In addition, because letters have such strong ties to the history of the novel and because the epistolary tradition is so prominent in literature from the previous era, using the letter in fiction automatically invokes literary history. The comparisons between the functions of letters in the eighteenth century and the functions of letters in the twentieth century demonstrate that using the letter in fiction automatically puts novels in conversation with texts from previous literary eras. An author’s ability to use the epistolary form in new ways depends on their knowledge of how letters in fiction were traditionally used. Thus the moments when authors take the epistolary form in new directions, they are also simultaneously referring to the letter’s origins.

This is why letters are used in the fiction of the twentieth century: they are a protean form that can be replicated or appropriated to comment on the relationship between written language, subjectivity, and experience, and because their use puts novels in conversation with texts from previous literary eras.

My arguments about why letters are used in twentieth and twenty-first century fiction are exemplified in Zadie Smith’s On Beauty, a contemporary retelling of Howards End. Initially, in order to update the story, the first chapter is filled with Jerome’s emails, which function similarly to Helen’s letters, and the distinctive characteristics of email
even continue to contribute to the traditional functions of the included letter. However, emails do not completely replace the letter in the text, because the discovery of a note written by Carlene Kipps to Kiki Belsey is set up as one of the climaxes of the novel. In *On Beauty*, Smith initially uses email as one of the primary forms of communication in her novel, but self-consciously uses the epistolary form as an anachronism to comment on modern media ecology and to continue to connect her text with the literary past where it has its origins.

The information Jerome includes in his emails to his father works to reveal a certain part of his character. He is ambitious, taking an internship in what is gradually revealed to be London, and a bit rebellious, for he has taken this job probably against his father’s wishes. His Christian faith, made evident by his several references to the Bible and to praying, also makes him the black sheep of the family, for several times he comments on their skepticism toward religion. The two email addresses on the first page of the novel also work to reveal a lot of information about the two characters in this correspondence. Jerome’s father’s email address is “HowardBelsey@fas.Wellington.edu” (Smith 3). Lots of people use pseudonyms or abbreviations as part of their email address, but the capitalization of the two names suggest that this person’s electronic identification is actually his full name. The “@fas.Wellington.edu” has the by-now-familiar “.edu,” designating Wellington as some sort of American institution of higher learning, like a college or university. The abbreviation “fas” probably stands for “faculty and staff,” implying that Howard Belsey is an employee of this university, not a student. One immediately learns a lot about Howard Belsey from his email address, and one learns a lot about Jerome from his email
address as well. Instead of using his full name, Jerome begins his email address with a
title, “jeromeabroad” giving a clear indication of his current lifestyle status, and the
“@easymail.com” reinforces this idea as it calls to mind such email servers such as
yahoo.mail, gmail, or hotmail, which allow users to easily check email from any
computer terminal.

Jerome’s email address and the content of his email do work to keep one
important piece of information about him secret—his ethnic background. His reference
to his father’s first sexual escapade in Hyde Park alludes to the fact that Jerome has
British ancestry, and his description of the Kipps family identifies their heritage as being
Anglo-Caribbean, but it isn’t until Chapter 2 where the African American identity of his
mother, and thus his own racial identity, is revealed.

Jerome’s emails reveal his thoughts and emotions, replicating the original uses of
the letter in fiction. In the third letter in the correspondence, for example, Jerome tries to
explain his newfound love of Victoria Kipps to his father. This email also demonstrates
how Jerome relies on different symbols as well as words to express himself. Unlike
Robbie Turner in Atonement, Jerome is not afraid to use the exclamation mark. There
are fifteen exclamation marks in the third email and Jerome even calls attention to them
by saying, “Are you digging these exclamation marks!!!!” (Smith 7). And like Joyce’s
female letter writers, Jerome signs all his emails with Xs and Os, traditionally symbols
for kisses and hugs. But a couple of times in his electronic correspondence, Jerome uses
emoticons to try to articulate his emotions while writing. An emoticon is defined as “A
sideways facial glyph used in e-mail to indicate an emotion or attitude, as to indicate
intended humor” (“emoticons”). Jerome writes, “Now I begin to see why Zora enrolled
in Wellington . . . lot easier to miss your deadline when Daddy’s the teacher ☺” and “Have you found a way to prove Rembrandt was no good yet? ☺” (Smith 5). Thus when Jerome uses this symbol next to a sentence he is trying to tell his father he is making a joke, or that he should not take his son’s comments too seriously. This mark works to reduce the criticism inherent in these comments earmarking them as attempts at being attempts at humor.

The narrative and reader elements of Jerome’s email function very similar to Helen’s letters at the beginning of Howards End. Like Helen’s letters, Jerome’s emails set the stage for the major events in the novel and introduce some of the major players. The community minded, politically conservative, and family-oriented Kipps are contrasted with the more irreverent, playful, and liberal Belseys. The emails also work to divert the reader from what will be the dominant storylines in On Beauty. Jerome and Victoria Kipps’ relationship is quickly over, but Victoria’s affair with Howard will become one of the main events in the plot and lead the novel to its climax—Kiki’s separation from her husband. Jerome’s emails are another example where the narrative function is dominant over the disclosure function in a moment of character narration; as in Howards End, in Chapter 1, readers of On Beauty find themselves eavesdropping on characters’ conversations or, more accurately, reading a computer screen over a character’s shoulder. Jerome plunges into descriptions of his life in England without describing any of the events that led him to his new job in a new city, and his attempts to imagine his dad’s reactions to his new surroundings imply that his dad is partially familiar with parts of his situation, although it is not clear how much, how well, or from what his dad knows Monty Kipps and his family.
Jerome seems extremely comfortable using email to communicate, but his father is not, and Smith immediately highlights this aspect of Howard Belsey’s character from the very beginning of the novel. Jerome’s first lines in his first email are “Hey Dad—basically I’m just going to keep on keeping on with these mails—I’m no longer expecting you to reply, but I’m still hoping you will, if that makes sense” (Smith 3). These lines begin to portray Howard Belsey as someone who infrequently communicates over email. Howard did not check his email before he went to London and missed Jerome’s last email, which informed his parents that his romance was over, and since Howard also does not carry a cell phone, no one could contact him with the news before he creates a scene at the Kipps’ house in London. The technology was available to transmit all of Jerome’s news successfully, but his father’s stubbornness created a gap in the lines of communication, causing messages to be delayed.

The first chapter of On Beauty demonstrates that email can function in fiction successfully as a replacement for the letter. Jerome’s emails were used similarly to Helen’s letters in Howards End, and the more specific characteristics of electronic communication such as email addresses and emoticons worked to contribute to the character element of the epistolary tradition. However, despite this initial substitution of electronic mail for the epistolary form, in the second to the last chapter of On Beauty, a letter instead of an email contains an important message. While attempting to clean her son Levi’s room, Kiki Belsey finds a priceless painting under his bed, Maîtresse Erzulie.

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2 Smith imitates the one-sided correspondence in the first chapter of Howards End by including letters written by just one person in the first chapter. However, as in Forster’s novel, Jerome does receive responses to his emails. Both his father and his mother write him emails while he is abroad. These emails, like the missing missives from Margaret Schlegel to Helen, are not included in the text and no explanation for their absence is given. In addition, Smith’s characters refer to “emails” as “mails,” a reference I have never heard before.
by Jean Hyppolite. Kiki immediately recognizes the piece—it belonged to Carlene Kipps, and she believes her son stole it. Kiki is about to call Monty Kipps and try to return the work to avoid being sued, when her other son Jerome discovers a letter attached to this valuable work of art. The letter is from Carlene Kipps, saying she has left the painting to Kiki: “To Kiki—please enjoy this painting. It needs to be loved by someone like you. Your friend, Carlene . . . There is such shelter in each other” (Smith 431). In addition, the fact that the letter was stuck to a painting continues the association between letters and art that the modernists established in the early twentieth century.

Examining Carlene’s brief note using the elements of the epistolary tradition will help us understand how this note functions in the text, illuminating the reasons why a letter was used in this particular situation. Although this note was a surprise to the Belsey family, Carlene’s intention of leaving the painting to Kiki was well known by the Kipps and the readers of the novel. After Mrs. Kipps died, she left her family a note saying she would like Kiki to have the painting after she was gone. So the note attached to the painting is a moment of character narration, as in Nicholas Nickleby, when the narrative function is dominant over the disclosure function. In addition, the earlier scene with the Kipps in the novel reinforces the idea that the wishes Carlene expressed in her letter are genuine. Carlene’s message to her friend does not get delivered right away, and the situation where Kiki reads her note is probably different from what Carlene imagined. Carlene Kipps had written this personal letter to Kiki to explain why she was given the painting. Carlene probably assumed her American friend would read this note after her death, when Kiki received her gift. Carlene almost certainly did not intend for Kiki’s reading of the letter to be the first time she learns of her inheritance. Regardless of the
note’s delay and the differences between the note’s intention and its actual function, the physical nature of the letter is what allows it to eventually deliver its message. Carlene’s note is a record of her internal state, and these words on paper are able to preserve her thoughts and desires and give them to the proper recipient. This letter in On Beauty has a timelessness and permanence that other forms of communication in the novel do not, and this quality is reflected in the relationship the letter rewards. Jerome’s emails announced a love affair that lasted about a week, while the friendship the two women form extends beyond the grave. The physical object of the letter, which was viewed as harmful in the other postmodern texts in my study, is what preserved the message inside and allowed it to finally reach its destination. Smith’s use of the letter in this episode is a commentary on modern communicative media; even though advances have been made in the way people communicate, her use of the letter here seems to suggest that old-fashioned forms of communication still have their place in society. On Beauty is a proponent of differentiation, then, using different media in specific ways.

Thinking about the letters using the parameters of the narrative element of the epistolary tradition, contributes to our understanding about how, and then why, Carlene’s note is used in On Beauty. As previously mentioned, the letter adds to the characters’ understanding of the events in the narrative, making the storyworld more coherent, and initially the letter seems to have an impact on the narrative. After Kiki learns the painting is hers, she separates from her husband and gets her own apartment in Boston. But the letter is probably not what precipitated this change. The narrator does not report on the events that take place which lead to Kiki’s independence, but one must assume that Kiki’s learning of her husband’s latest affair with Victoria Kipps is why she moved out,
not because she inherited the painting. In fact, when the action of the novel is being reported again after a two-month hiatus, Kiki does not even physically possess the painting; she is fighting Monty Kipps for it in court. In addition, it does not seem that Kiki’s life will be substantially affected if she wins her lawsuit. Although the painting is probably worth half a million dollars, Levi proudly tells his family that Kiki will not keep any of the money if she decides to sell the painting—she is going to donate the profit from the sale of the artwork to a Haitian refugee support group.

Carlene’s letter, then, has a more symbolic function; like other letters in postmodern fiction, her note to Kiki bridges different metalevels in the text. Kiki’s discovery that she inherited the painting corresponds with her separation from Howard, who wouldn’t let her own any painted portraits, thus her inheritance of the work from Carlene symbolizes her independence and her repossession of black female power. *Maîtresse Erzulie* is a real painting, so Carlene’s letter gives a fictional character a representation of a real work of art, linking the world of the text with the world of nonfiction.

In *Howards End*, Margaret learns about Mrs. Wilcox’s intention to leave her the family’s summer home from Dolly, Charles Wilcox’s silly wife. After Henry has announced to his family that Margaret will inherit Howards End when he dies, Dolly foolishly remarks, “It does seem curious that Mrs. Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she gets it, after all” (Forster 270). In *On Beauty*, Smith needed to recreate this scenario, but since there is little interaction between the Kipps and Belsey's, it would be hard to engineer a verbal slip like the one in *Howards End*, so she uses the letter as a way of announcing Kiki’s inheritance. The letter’s function in this situation
allows Smith to construct a scene that is parallel to, but doesn’t replicate, a moment in Howards End, and because there are so many letters in Forster’s novel, the use of the letter also helps maintain On Beauty’s connection to the modernist work. In addition, the discovery of the letter also puts On Beauty in conversation with literature from previous eras. Jerome’s finding of Carlene’s letter is serendipitous, because it is dependent on such a long chain of events, and is thus reminiscent of other moments in literature where impossibly hidden letters are found, as in The Moonstone. Smith’s use of the letter in On Beauty, then is not just a commentary on communication; it is a self-conscious move that deliberately invokes other moments in literary history. Carlene’s letter places On Beauty within the larger literary tradition of British and American fiction and connects it to the origins of the novel form in the eighteenth century.

When Jerome first discovers the letter from Carlene Kipps, he says to his mother, “It’s just there’s something stuck here” (Smith 430). On Beauty demonstrates that despite the changes in real world technology, the letter is “stuck” in literature. Its protean nature and its connection to the past make it a dynamic literary form that has contributed—and will continue to contribute—to the evolution of fiction.


ANN LANDERS IN HER OWN WORDS. ED. MARGO HOWARD. <http://WWW.MARGOHOWARD.COM/COLUMNS/COLUMNS.ASP>.


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