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Letter Fiction and Diary Fiction

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Abstract: The article investigates that the line goes between diary fiction and letter fiction and how these two genres differ from each other. The closest consensus from the scholars discussed here is that letter fiction often is intensely focused on the existence of a reader, while diary fiction in its purest form is focused on the isolation of the self, and the self-consciousness in writing something that is directed at this self rather than recipients that cannot be reached with the spoken word.

Keywords: epistolary fiction, diary fiction and letter fiction, reader, recipient, epistolary narrative, addressee, a private letter.

Introduction

When the working definition of "epistolary fiction" is "fiction narrated through the form of documents", there are obviously further distinctions to be made within the genre – a newspaper article will never be written in the same style and with the same intent as a private letter between husband and wife. *The Color Purple* is sometimes described as a diary novel, which is not surprising given the conditions under which Celie writes her letters to God in particular, but also to Nettie – they are in part written without expecting answers, and at least in part written without expecting to be even *read*. Celie does not think of her letters as anything else than just that, as written documents saying the things she wishes to tell the recipients she cannot speak to in person. But regardless of Celie's presumed thoughts on the topic, common sense and studies of the two styles in fiction suggest that there are differences between the letter addressed to others, however intimate, and the diary addressed to the self, however unconscious. To draw a line separating the two, however, has proven difficult. H. P. Abbot has one stance: The letter strategy and the diary strategy are so similar that what can be said analytically about the one is frequently transferable to the other the difference, then, between a study of epistolary fiction and a study of diary fiction derives not from a strict semantic distinction between 'letter' versus 'diary', but from a difference in focus or emphasis[1]. As he commences to discuss what he perceives to be the peculiarities of the diary style, Abbott includes novels usually regarded as "traditionally" epistolary because of the above cited similarity of form, but difference in focus: the issue is not the the existence of the addresse, but "the degree to which the addressee is given an independent life and an active textual role in the work"[2]. He illustrates by way of *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, where Werther's main correspondent, Wilhelm, is "unchanging, represented for us entirely through Werther's words, he is easily conceived as Werther's other self, the solid rational

[1] Abbot, H. Porter: *Diary Fiction: Writing As Action*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1984.
[2] Abbot, H. Porter: *Diary Fiction: Writing As Action*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1984.

self that Werther seeks to override"[3]. Altman (to whose study on epistolary narrative Abbott refers) considers the Wilhelm-type figure to be a "passive confidant" whose only purpose in the narrative is to receive information, to be told things that she cannot witness[4]; she is, in Altman's words, "the sounding board to the hero's sentiments"[5]. Lorna Martens says on the same example: "If the recipient in an epistolary novel is a confidant, an alter ego whose personality does not affect the tone or content of the letter writer's utterances, the fictive reader all but disappears"[6]. Altman is also quite clear on the differences in mentality behind a diarist writing for herself, and the letter writer who reaches out to her addressee: The particular *you* whose constant appearances distinguishes letter discourse from other written discourse (memoir, diary, rhetoric) is an image of the addressee who is elsewhere. Memory and expectation keep the addressee present to the imagination of the writer[7]. But it is not only on the level of the psychological state of the letter-writer/narrator that the existence of this other person is a crucial influence: the very rhetoric of letters – as opposed to diaries – relies on the presence of another person, and a unique, tangible relationship between the writer and the reader. Abbott defines the unclear relationship between the letter and the diary novel by terminology and association: "The term 'diary' evokes an intensity of privacy, cloistering,

He also remarks that fictive diarists often will address their entries to "friend, lover, God, the diary itself"[8]. Altman makes the comparison between the part of the addressee in the epistolary novel and the confidante of classical drama, and notes that the diary novel, in this regard, is analogous to the theatrical monologue.

"Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the epistolary language is the extent to which it is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship existing between them. Those works that we perceive as being the most "epistolary," as cultivating the letter form most fully, are those in which the *I-you* relationship shapes the language used, and in which *I* becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he isolation, that the term 'letter' does not"[9]. A similar observation is made by Martens, who remarks that the diary evokes "not only a certain form but also a certain content, a particular context or specific accompanying circumstances, and an implicit purpose or legitimation"[10]. As a counterpoint, what Abbott defines as the "diary mode" can be found in writing not defined as diaries or journals. Gerald Prince writes, it is not a superficial journal shape which particularizes a diary novel. I say this not only because a third-person narration respecting that convention, or a fictional log, a ledger, a cashbook, would not constitute a diary novel, but also because some well known diary novels do not adopt to that exterior shape. Prince defines the diary novel as "a first first-person novel in which the narrator is a protagonist in the events recorded", and in which the time of narration is fragmented, where events are narrated as they happen rather than in retrospective. The lack of an addressee is no does not distinguish the diary novel from the letter novel, as there are many examples of diarists writing with one or more readers in mind. Prince concludes that "what makes a diary novel unlike any other kind of narrative is, rather, a theme – or more precisely, a complex of themes and motifs". That theme is the very keeping of a diary, and all that is associated with it: The origin of the diary, the circumstances of its publication, its physical shape, its dialectical relationship with the narrator: some or all of these problems, as well as others related to them are re-examined to a greater or lesser extent in every work considered to be a diary novel Most of Abbot's trademarks of diary fiction connect to the isolated individual consciousness that struggles with itself; he defines the difference between epistolary and diary fiction not as a matter of intention, but as a matter of the

[3] Altman, Janet Gurkin: *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.
[4] Altman, Janet Gurkin: *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.
[5] Altman, Janet Gurkin: *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.
[6] Martens, Lorna: *The Diary Novel.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
[7] Altman, Janet Gurkin: *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.
[8] Abbot, H. Porter: *Diary Fiction: Writing As Action*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1984.
[9] Abbot, H. Porter: Diary Fiction: Writing As Action. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1984.
[10] Martens, Lorna: *The Diary Novel.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

overall effect of the narrative: the strategic decision that the author makes is not the decision to have periodic entries in letter form or in diary form, but the decision to create cumulatively the effect of a consciousness thrown back on its own resources, abetted only by its pen. This, in turn, is remarkably close to what Perry argues in her discussion on how isolation (social or emotional) affects the writers in the novel of letters. She claims that the process of writing letters well might be an act of communication, but that the recipient in the letter-writer's mind is not so much the person that she has been separated from for days, months or years, but often a fantasy stand-in made up of the writer's imagination as she has read the letters she in turn received, and her memories of this person the last time they were together: "This accounts for the uncanny tenacity of epistolary relationships, because events in the imagination often have stronger hold on a person than do physical experiences in the material world"[11]. Writers in epistolary novels might write *to* another person, but they will often write *for* themselves, to settle their own feelings and find their own catharsis.

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

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

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