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<p style="text-align:center">The Epistolary Genre from the Renaissance Until Today</p>

Among a variety of literary genres, epistolary literature is one of the most intriguing—even though it is less popular than some other mainstream genres such as satire or saga, for example. This genre of literature emerged during the Renaissance, apparently as a result of experimentation with new writing techniques. From the Renaissance to modernity, the epistolary genre gradually evolved by providing stories with new meanings and deviating from principles of accurate narration.

The epistolary genre unites all literary works, which consists of a series of documents, letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, and other sources instead of traditional text. Typically, epistolary works do not feature an "omniscient narrator," which is common in written prose. Similarly, each character in such works, as a rule, possesses his or her own "collection" of documents (Pearl et al. 3). Such collections can reveal the character's story, as well as one's relationship with other characters. Many epistolary novels include no text other than the collections of such documents, creating a different representation of the plot and characters involved.

Writers began publishing comprehensive epistolary novels during the Renaissance. One of the first epistolary works was *Prison of Love* by Diego de San Pedro published at the end of the 15th century. The novel featured a series of letters sent by a non-royal protagonist Leriano to

his beloved lady, Laureola (Celdran xii). This example demonstrates a common characteristic of epistolary works of this period. Many contemporary works were a series of love letters or romantic stories, in which characters expressed their feelings, hopes, expectations, and disappointments, as well as rejection. By referring to the *Image of Idleness* and other works of the 16th century, Beebee (31-32) points out how letters with marriage proposals and rejections of such proposals might have shaped the early development of the epistolary genre. Publications of letters requesting professional or friendly advice on some issues were probably another factor in the development of this genre.

These trends began to change in the 17th and 18th centuries when the epistolary genre gained popularity and started featuring highly diverse themes and characters. *Clarissa* written by Samuel Richardson in 1748 is a bright example of a mature epistolary novel. The work focuses on the tragic story of Clarissa Harlowe, who attempts to become free from her wealthy but oppressive family only to become a prisoner of the abusive villain Robert Lovelace. Remarkably, Richardson managed to narrate this emotional story by creating a series of letters, legal documents, the remains of Clarissa's poetry, musical compositions, and other written sources. Such diversity not only creates an engaging setting for the novel, but also emphasizes the differences between characters (Pearl et al. 4). The author featured a variety of letters, including letters written jointly by multiple persons and letters authored by impostors, to represent various events and aspects of the characters' inner world. The book became a widely recognized masterpiece, demonstrating the potential of epistolary literature.

Epistolary literature of the 18th and 19th centuries focused on depicting true thoughts and feelings. Indeed, Gubernatis (9-10) notes that contemporary authors used letters to reveal

psychological states and highlight the diverse inner worlds of their characters—not to mention that characters' reactions to letters had implications for the plot. Another notable trend of that period was the use of letters to enable readers to perceive the events of the story from the character's point of view, generating new experiences (Gubernatis 12). Furthermore, epistolary writing created a sense of uncertainty about future events, making it easier for readers to believe that the events were taking place in "real time," not narrated after the events had occurred (Gubernatis 13).

Indeed, traditional novels often failed to show the escalation of tension, as well as the fears and other deep emotions that protagonists experienced. Another prominent trait of contemporary epistolary novels, according to Gubernatis (14), was that they secured an overlap of both "narrative" and "disclosure" functions. That peculiarity became possible because readers learn all relevant facts at the same time as the character does. By presenting the story in such diverse dimensions, epistolary works succeeded in narrating true and authentic stories, which often contrasted with unrealistic and simplified depictions of events and behaviors in classical novels. The material nature of letters further enhanced the sense of authenticity. Consequently, the epistolary genre (as well as its basic tools) became popular among writers.

This historical period witnessed the rise of what Gubernatis defines as "epistolary tradition"—a set of practices and writing techniques, which writers used to create epistolary novels (Gubernatis 15). Classical writers used narratives, characters, and objects to create a reliable record of thoughts and events. However, in the 20th century, this trend reversed, as writers began experimenting with documents to create different narratives, which were not necessarily accurate and comprehensive. *Howards End* by Edward Morgan Forster is a bright

example of how writers started deviating from epistolary traditions. The novel features letters that contain omissions and might not narrate all events in chronological order (Gubernatis 17-18).

Moreover, unlike conventional epistolary works, *Howards End* does not explicitly explain all relevant facts to readers so that the narrative function prevails. Indeed, characters craft their letters in such a manner that readers need to carefully analyze them in order to understand their meaning and the essence of the events taking place (Gubernatis 19). In essence, modern writers began using epistolary techniques to question the epistolary tradition and challenge commonly accepted ideas about the reliability of subjective experiences and documents.

This strategy reflected modernist and postmodernist trends in literature. Unlike its predecessors, creators of modernist and postmodernist literature rejected notions of logic, progress, rationality, and objectivity. Many writers of that period wrote novels featuring unreliable protagonists whose memories or narratives were incomplete, incomprehensible, inaccurate, or otherwise confusing and misleading. Epistolary novels reflected these patterns by using letters that no longer acted as their real-life counterparts (Gubernatis 19). For example, Gubernatis (73) notes that modernist epistolary literature emphasized differences between the objective world depicted in the novel and the character's perception of this world. Meanwhile, postmodernist writers featured letters with the incorrect use of language, producing miscommunication (Gubernatis 172). Such solutions encouraged readers to scrutinize documents and narratives instead of believing their content unconditionally.

In conclusion, epistolary literature, which emerged in the Renaissance as a collection of love letters, gradually evolved into a mature genre that featured complex stories and characters.

However, in the 20th century, the genre started shifting its focus towards exploring the flaws in narratives and documents. Such changes reflected the transition from traditions of literary realism—which acknowledged objective reality—to modernism and postmodernism that questioned the accuracy of subjective experiences and documents that relied on them.

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