

**Love texts: The Lacanian gaze in epistolary literature
in the 21st century**

By

Erin Marce O'Dwyer, BA/LLB (Hons)

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The purloined letter has become a symbol of seduction, confession and betrayal.

This thesis explores the origins of the epistolary novel, its enduring influence and its place in contemporary literature. It asks: If letters do not exist, will epistolary novels exist? And how long will contemporary authors continue to find inspiration from an old-fashioned form?

Three case studies are considered: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) and Damon Galgut's *In A Strange Room* (2010). Each novel draws on the epistolary tradition, exploring universal themes of absence, exile, loneliness and grief through the eyes of the bereaved lover *who writes*.

The seductive power of epistolary literature can be situated within Jacques Lacan's gaze theory. The gaze sets up an inherent secret, revealing the truth only in the final dénouement. It anticipates the voyeuristic reader, compelling him or her to watch.

A creative work accompanies this thesis. *In My Grandfather's House* draws on all the usual epistolary themes: love, exile, trial and self-identity. The primary source is a bundle of love letters written from my grandfather to my grandmother, in 1941. These are contained within the structure of three letters – one to my grandfather, one to a former lover and one to my young sons. A reflective chapter considers the gaze in my own work, and the circumstances in which 'found' letters should be read and published.

1. Introduction

1.1 *My dearest...*

The day after my grandfather died, we found a pile of yellowing love letters. The letters were stuffed in a sandwich bag, on top of a pile of old newspapers, presumably ready to be thrown out. Ironically, his death preserved them. And what my grandfather planned to discard became to me a precious gift.

His love letters begin as every love letter should – “My dearest . . .” – and are addressed to the woman who became his wife, my grandmother. They span the year of 1941. It was the year before they married and a time when my grandfather was a frequent traveller on what were among the first regular commercial flights between Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

In eloquent ramblings home to his sweetheart Norma, Max Gericke remarks on the social fabric of the three cities at that time. Though an accountant, he was a lover of language, history and poetry. His letters reveal keen observation and an elegant prose. He writes of Sydney:

Practically everyone tries to get a view of the harbour. You'd be amazed at the positions some homes are built on. No soil for gardens. And the space for the clothes line has to be cut from rock. Land is a fabulous price too.

In Melbourne he sees women employed as tram conductors for the first time. In Newcastle, Wollongong, Ballarat and Geelong, he reports on the birth of suburbia. He also professes his love for my grandmother and his dreams for their shared

future. The same musings about truth and beauty he shared with her are the same values he held until the day he died at 96.

Max Gericke did not keep a diary and so his letter writing captured his thoughts. They preserve the private contemplations and self-reflections that occupied a bachelor of his era moving into married life. They provide a remarkable insight into a man I knew well, unlocking for me the parts of him that were private and off-limits. The young man is present in the old man I knew. But in death, remarkably, I have come to know him better.

Letters seem all the more important as the death knell rings over the handwritten letter. Collections of letters are regularly published, devoured by readers who want to know more about the people who shaped their times, just as they were indeed shaped by them¹. In a recent exhibition at the Australian War Memorial, it was the original letters that breathed life into the exhibits of wedding dresses, bomber jackets and photographs². Letters written by the poet Judith Wright to her philosopher husband Jack McKinney, and published after her death by their daughter, provide a remarkable insight into her character and her non-conforming bohemian lifestyle (Clarke & McKinney 2006). A recent memoir by the stepdaughter of writer Elizabeth Jolley draws on letters to piece together the truth of her childhood (Swingler 2012). Novelist Salman Rushdie recently donated a

¹ See for example Reid, C. (ed) 2007, *The Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber and Faber, London ; Day, B. (ed) 2007, *The Letters of Noel Coward*, Knopf, New York; and Speck, C. 2011, *Heysen to Heysen: Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*, National Library of Australia, Canberra. See also revelations about “unpublished manuscripts” in letters written by the reclusive author JD Salinger: <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/04/glimpses-of-salinger-tucked-inside-catcher-in-the-rye/> (accessed June 27, 2012). And a new collection of Ernest Hemingway’s letters to be published: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2011/10/hemingway-201110> (accessed June 27, 2012).

²Australian War Memorial, Of Love and War exhibition <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/loveandwar> (accessed June 27, 2012).

number of personal computers containing extensive email correspondence, as well as private journals and notebooks detailing his creative process, to Emory University in the US³.

How will the great figures of this generation be perceived after their death, if not through their personal correspondence? And in what form will this century's leaders and citizens leave their personal legacy? Handwritten letters are already slipping from collective memory, a mode of communication made redundant by technology. In some ways, email is good news for the art of writing. We are living, more and more, in a text-based society. But few emails and text messages are saved, just as telegrams were not saved. Meanwhile email is falling out of fashion, in favour of text messaging, instant messaging and online social networking. As cultural theorist Dominic Pettman observes:

Anything with vowels is considered too gushy and gauche. Teenagers are being 'creeped out' by anyone trying to express themselves in an extended, articulate way (O'Dwyer 2008).

Online communities keep us in touch in real time in ways inconceivable only a few years ago. And though it is through the written word – a changing, morphing, elliptical one – that we communicate, the loss of the handwritten letter as a means of personal communication is symptomatic of changes in our society, and how we live and relate. The loss of letters may be a loss of insight into the past.

³ www.news.emory.edu/tags/topic/salman_rushdie/index.html (accessed January 14, 2013).

Is there any future for the handwritten letter? The page that bears the lovers' mark – the recognisable script, the usual flair, the ability to transport the receiver elsewhere in time? What of the meandering epistle that allows the writer to ponder their own feelings and ideas, and communicate them slowly and thoughtfully to a loved one? And what of the epistolary novels that draw on the characteristics and qualities of the love letter? If letters do not exist, will epistolary novels exist? How long will authors find inspiration from an old-fashioned form of cultural capital and in what ways, if any, will letters be used in literature in the 21st century?

Embedded in every love letter is a story of desire. Between lovers, the desire is to overcome a real or imagined separation. In epistolary fiction this desire transfers to the reader, awakened by the writer in a conscious appeal to our unconscious fantasy.

As Ben Stolfus writes in his book *Lacan and Literature*:

If the dream is the iconic, although masked mirror of the unconscious, fiction is its linguistic reflector. In this context literature emerges as the melding of the conscious and the unconscious realms of the psyche (Stolfus 1996, p. 2).

All fiction is pleasurable and voyeuristic. But in epistolary fiction, desire is inherent. Epistolary fiction purloins the letter and transforms it into a framing device that accentuates the voyeuristic and the secret. It positions us not just as spectators, but as detectives, sleuths and scopophiles who gaze through the keyhole and watch as the action unfolds.

Even in novels that are not strictly epistolary, the letter is a potent symbol of seduction, confession and betrayal. In the epistolary mode, letters are more than mere missives of love. Rather, they are signs of absence, loss, death, indiscretion, guilt and blame. For the writer, they are a means of atonement. For the addressee, an opportunity to understand and forgive. And for the receiver – the unintended reader who intercepts and reads – it is a chance to learn or sometimes to seek unfair advantage. As readers, we become the detectives – piecing together each clue that appears. What was once an innovative literary technique that offered “a shortcut, as it were, to the heart” (Watt 1957, p. 157) endures because it seduces and teases, offering up the private, internal world as spectacle, unfolding it before the reader’s gaze.

Good writing offers the promise of abundance yet delivers only in small and delicate morsels. As Stolfus observes: “Writing manifests desire and deferral, simultaneously” (1996, p. 64). His analysis of the use of letters and telegrams in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is intriguing and instructive – an ideal foregrounding for the discussion which will follow. Stolfus argues the novel recalls Freud’s famous pleasure principle – the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The concept was inspired by Freud’s observation of his grandson’s *fort/da!* (there/gone!) game, in which the little boy threw a toy out of his cot and pulled it back again by its string.

The pleasure principal, like Ernst’s string and spool, reels the characters in, connecting them with letters, wires, postcards, newspaper dispatches, and words. Strings, wires and writing are the metaphoric ties for this compulsive and repetitive behaviour activated by the pleasure principle... Writing, riding

in taxis and trains, wires, telegrams, postcards, fishing lines, railroad lines, the end of the line, the lines of the novel are all strings that bind absence to presence, loss to retrieval – ties that link desire with life and the postponement of death (Stolzfus, p. 64).

Such teasing seduction is pleasurable for the reader. It makes us active participants and ensures we are invested in the outcome. The addresser may be writing to the addressee but the addresser also addresses us, the readers.

[The novel's] symbolic language exists in the form of a knot (not) – a knot to be untangled and a prohibition to be understood. The letters, postcards, telegrams and the writing of the novel are its symbolic untangling. The reader's role is to unravel and connect all the lines (Stolzfus 1996, p. 62).

This exegesis explores how and why this seminal genre endures; and why and in what ways it is being reworked in contemporary writing. It will consider the epistolary genre with reference to Jacques Lacan's gaze theory and identify the ways in which the gaze plays out in the epistolary genre. Three case studies will be considered: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) and Damon Galgut's *In A Strange Room* (2010).

I have deliberately excluded experimental e-novels. These appeared as a blip on the literary landscape circa 2000 and would appear to have little literary value⁴. Historical epistolary novels too have been excluded. They are, I would suggest, those in which the narrative is set in the past – in a time when handwritten letters were a common form of communication. A case in point is AS Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) which reveals a secret romance between two eminent Victorian-era writers who conducted their affair almost entirely through letters. That style of epistolary fiction will not be considered in the current discussion though no doubt writers will continue to mine it, even as handwritten letters fade from view.

My grandfather’s letters are purloined letters. We read them – my mother, my sisters and I – knowing they were never meant to be read by us. But we are in good company. When the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young admirer Franz Xaver Kappus he would not have expected that the letters would be published after his death. Still, Kappus recognised their merit – Rilke’s writing is moving and profound. Not only does it serve as a tool to understand his work, but he is a moral teacher, soothing and urging, teaching us about how to live better. “Stay patient,” Rilke writes, “with all that is unresolved in your own heart. For just now, live the questions.”⁵

⁴ In her discussion of the email epistolary novel *The Metaphysical Touch* (1999) by Sylvia Brownrigg, Mikko Keskinen says that the place of email novels has yet to be theorised in literary criticism (Keskinen 2004, p. 402). To my knowledge, there has been no significant critical writing on the genre since. Other email epistolary novels to appear around the same time were *Single White E-Mail* (1998) by Jessica Adams, *e: A Novel* (2000) by Matt Beaumont, and more recently *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2007) by Paul Torday.

⁵ Rilke, R.M. 2000, *Sonnets to Orpheus with Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. S. Cohn, Carcanet, Manchester.

My grandfather's life could not have been more different from Rilke's. He was far from Europe's bohemians. He lived quietly, morally, and was faithful to one woman. He did nothing to merit international acclaim. Yet his letters are beautifully written and an extraordinary time capsule. He was a man who believed in the importance of history and in standing up for personal beliefs. Some of his sentiments are from a different era too, yet many of his pronouncements are ahead of their time. Like Rilke, he writes as a great moral teacher – one for whom morality is inseparable from beauty and truth.

1.2 Research design and methodology

There is a startling gap in epistolary scholarship as it relates to the impact of email and other computer mediated communication (CMC) on letter fiction. Much of the ground work done by Linda S Kauffman has been built upon by feminist academics working on historical letter collections or in autobiographical writing, rather than in literature. Other writers in the field give key consideration to the epistolary fiction of the 17th and 18th centuries, often taking a narrow focus such as British scholar Joe Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (2003). To my knowledge there has been no focused research on the fate of the epistolary novel in the digital age. This provides an opportunity for what I believe is timely work not only as it relates to email and epistolary but also to the impact of technology on writing and the development of the novel through the information revolution.

These questions have guided my research:

- 1.1 What makes epistolary literature so compelling?
- 1.2 In what forms does epistolary literature survive in the digital age?
- 1.3 In what ways does the stylistic influence of epistolary literature continue in the 21st century?
- 1.4 Does Lacan's analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (Muller & Richardson 1988) have relevance to the study of contemporary epistolary literature?
- 1.5 In what ways does his theory of the gaze operate to engage the reader?

Answering these questions has involved a detailed review of epistolary literature, as well as relevant academic scholarship on epistolary. I have also undertaken a detailed investigation of psychoanalytic literature, with a focus on Lacan's own writings as well as those of his students and critics.

A second set of research questions allow me to tackle issues arising in the production of my own creative work:

- 2.1 In what circumstances should 'found' love letters be read and published?
- 2.2 What ethical considerations should be given to the use 'found' love letters in literature?

Numerous texts offer guidance on research design and methodology in the social sciences (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000; Bryman 2004; Crotty 1998). My qualitative research project is based on a comparative research design and three case studies

have been selected. Bryman explains that case study research allows for intensive analysis of the chosen case studies as a means of answering the research questions (2004, p. 51 to 55). Each case study should be selected with regard to reliability and validity, in order that credible theory be identified and developed (2004, p. 52). Case studies should be selected so that common and distinguishing factors can be identified and compared (2004, pp. 53, 55).

Each case study has been selected according to five criteria. The work must be of literary significance, by an eminent writer, published after 2000, and able to be considered epistolary. *Atonement* was short listed for a Man Booker Prize in 2001. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* won the 2003 Orange Prize for Fiction. *In A Strange Room* was short-listed for the Booker in 2010. Prizes do not guarantee either eminence or literary longevity. However, they bestow an inherent credibility, usually due to the renown of the competition and its judges.

In addition, to qualify, each case study had to display the hallmarks of epistolarity as well as engage in a dialogue with the epistolary cannon. A key focus of Kauffman's work has been to identify the elements of the epistolary tradition, even once woven into another genre. This has been my guiding principle too. Kauffman argues, for example, that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has the "postmark of epistolary". Like all the other works included in her study, it "memorializes and mines all the classic conventions of epistolarity" to look forwards and backwards "Janus-like", in "remembrance and prophecy" (1992, pp. 223, xiii). McEwan, Shriver and Galgut all approach the materiality of their epistolary production in different ways, but their work can be firmly sited within the

epistolary mode, and they sit in conversation with other authors who have exploited its seductive style.

It should be noted that Kauffman gives great weight to the distinction between epistolary mode and genre. In her second work on topic, *Special Delivery*, she comes to the conclusion that mode should be the preferred term. The concept of mode allows her to consider epistolary as an incomplete and fractured form; with loose boundaries that make it resilient and adaptive; able to combine with and influence other kinds of writing; making it of continued and continuing relevance over centuries (1992, pp. xiii, xiv). Importantly, epistolary characteristics remain identifiable and apparent – exemplifying what is epistolary at the same time as the confounding the generic conventions of the particular work. A more intensive discussion of what defines epistolarity is considered below.

The key question in selecting case studies is not whether the findings can be generalised, rather how well theory can be developed (Bryman 2004). It is not intended that these novels anticipate how the epistolary tradition will continue in the 21st century. Nor is it suggested that contemporary epistolary literature must develop in line with the approach taken by these particular authors. It is enough that these books allow me to develop theory around the genre, explore the changes that have occurred as a result of the development of the novel and the dawn of the digital era, and identify the qualities and characteristics of epistolary literature that endure in contemporary literature.

1.3 A Lacanian framework

My theoretical framework draws on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. A brief overview of key concepts as they relate to my thesis – in particular the gaze as espoused in Lacan’s analysis of *The Purloined Letter* – is provided below. I will also consider the questions that arise from Lacan’s analysis and the reason for their application to the study of epistolary literature. Further discussion and analysis of Lacan is provided in Chapter 3.

Amid the confusing and opaque language that usually accompanies any discussion of Lacan, Malcolm Bowie makes this keen observation: “Lacan reads Freud. This is the simplest and most important thing about him” (1987, p. 100).

Like Freud before him, Lacan was interested in desire. Bowie describes the concept of desire as the “major conceptual nostrum of our age” and attributes this to the work of Freud (p. 2). In reading Freud, Lacan reconceptualises the classic Oedipus complex. He rethinks the structure of the unconscious and the unconscious nature of human desire. But he undertakes his work through the prism of structural linguistics, opening up the study of desire and the human mind with reference to language and literature. That, as well as his proclamation that *the unconscious is structured like language*, gives Lacan an eminent position in cultural criticism (Lacan 2002, p. 222). His theory of the gaze was pivotal in the development of film theory in the late 20th century and his textual and psychoanalytic analysis of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* has had major influence on literary criticism.

Two key Lacanian concepts will be considered – the gaze and the letter as signifier. Of particular interest is the “third gaze” – that of the innocent third party, the Other,

who sees all but does not understand what he sees. In the story of *The Purloined Letter* this is the King who must be kept ignorant of the Queen's affair, and thus of the existence of an incriminating letter. In the story, a government Minister steals the letter, presumably intending to blackmail the Queen. At the moment of the theft, the Queen cannot make a fuss for fear of alerting her husband the King. She calls in the chief of police, who calls in the detective Dupin. Dupin finds the letter in the Minister's possession, but becomes embroiled himself when he writes a cryptic note to the Minister, alerting him that he has been found out. Lacan's analysis of Poe's story has particular relevance for any discussion of epistolary literature. In it, he explains the workings of the gaze and the function of the letter as *pure signifier* – a symbol with indefinite meaning which determines how each of the characters will act. Lacanian gaze theory invites questions of literary voyeurism, namely how spectator positions are created within the text and how the reader's gaze is anticipated. This is the crux of the theoretical framework as it applies to my thesis.

Philosopher and eminent Lacanian scholar Slavoj Žižek explains the concept of the third gaze in far more detail than Lacan ever did. He identifies it as the gaze belonging to the ignorant, innocent onlooker (1992a, pp. 214, 215). It is the husband excluded from the gaze of the wife and her lover. It is the small child who does not understand the lovers' feud. (We will see this below when we consider McEwan's *Atonement* and LP Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1958)). It is important to make the distinction that as readers we do not hold the third gaze; this is reserved for the players in the narrative. However, our role as voyeurs is intended and anticipated, and we are compelled to watch in guilty, furtive pleasure. Herein lies the seduction of the epistolary mode.

Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* is seminal in literary theory. His reanalysis of Poe's story also prompted a renewed interest in epistolary criticism, notably from French philosopher Jacques Derrida, American literary critic Barbara Johnson and American scholar Janet Altman whose influential 1982 book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* gave rise to numerous other academic texts on the letter. Importantly, Lacan's analysis comes from a psychoanalytic standpoint. He proposes that *a letter always arrives at its destination* and that the trajectory of the letter is supreme in the story. Though the contents of the letter are never revealed in the story, the letter's function is to produce certain effects. As Johnson explains:

The letter acts like a signifier precisely to the extent that its function in the story does not require that its meaning be revealed: "the letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author, without anyone's ever bothering to worry about what it meant" (Johnson 1977, p. 464)⁶.

In Lacan's analysis, the letter in Poe's story operates as a signifier, not a signified. It does not invoke a certain concrete meaning. Rather its meaning changes according to each person, determining what each character will do next. The characters' actions are "determined by the place which pure signifier – the

⁶ Johnson is quoting directly from Lacan's *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"* here. The original seminar appeared in 1972 in *French Yale Studies*, 48, pp 39-72. Johnson's quote comes from the original French edition of Lacan's *Ecrits* 1966, Seuil, Paris. The translation and emphasis is hers. Subsequent reference to Lacan's seminar comes from *The Purloined Poe*, 1988, edited by John P Muller and William J Richardson, in which Lacan's seminar is reprinted.

purloined letter – comes to occupy in their trio” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32).

Thus the importance of the signifier is that it *signifies without being significant*. In his analysis, Lacan reads for *lack* rather than *presence* of meaning. That the letter’s content is never revealed is precisely what interests Lacan.

Lacan describes three gazes (or glances) within The Purloined Letter. The first is the gaze of King (and later the police) who sees nothing. The second is that of the Queen (and later the Minister) who “sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides”. And the third – the Minister and finally the detective Dupin – who see “that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32).

Lacan elaborates with reference to the proverbial ostrich. The first glance, he says, has its head stuck in the sand, the second believes that it is invisible, “all the while letting the third pluck its rear” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32). The King – the Other, the symbol of law and social order – must not know of the existence of the letter or the Queen’s indiscretion will be revealed. What is important is not the King’s actual gaze, rather how the King’s gaze causes the Queen, the Minister and Dupin to act (Žižek 1992a, p. 214).

What Lacan reveals then is a “web of exchanged glances” (Williams 1995, p. 73). In the first scene, there are three different “seeing positions” – the King, the Queen and the Minister. The second “mirror” scene contains the same three positions, but occupied by different characters. The police are in the first position, the Minister in

the second, and Dupin the detective is in the third. Thus, the characters dance around each other – seeing and not seeing, being seen and not being seen. As Žižek explains, the gaze is never dual but always implies ‘thirdness’ – an ignorant, innocent Other. Social order is destroyed in the moment that the Other (the King) becomes wise to their game. As Žižek emphasizes, *the Other must not know all* (Žižek 1992b, pp. 72-73).

What sets Lacan’s analysis apart from others who have considered Poe’s story is his identification of Dupin in this so-called “third position”⁷. This, says Felman, is “methodologically unprecedented” in literary criticism (1987, p. 45). Instead of looking for the meaningful in the text, Lacan teaches us to look for what is not meaningful, what in fact is the disruption of meaning. Thus, Dupin’s role as detective/analyst is not necessarily to find an answer or solve a mystery, but “perhaps more challengingly, to locate an *unknown*, to find a question” (Felman 1987, p. 49). Lacan, the ultimate detective-analyst, will also occupy this third position, when he comes to reveal Dupin’s fraud. As Muller and Richardson note:

It is the analyst’s (Lacan’s) function to discern for us the symbolic structure of the entire tale and to reveal its import for psychoanalysis (1988, p. 62).

Lacan begins his analysis by identifying the two mirror-image scenes:

⁷ Marie Bonaparte also gave a psychoanalytic reading of *The Purloined Letter*. It is reprinted in Muller and Richardson, 1988.

The special status of these terms [the three glances] results from their corresponding simultaneously to the three logical moments through which the decision is precipitated and the three places it assigns to the subjects among whom it constitutes a choice (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 31).

Lacan espouses that the structure of the gaze creates the moment in which a single decision is made. The Minister steals the letter. Later, the letter is “stolen” again, from the Minister, by the detective Dupin. The Minister’s decision to steal the letter is made in a “glance’s time” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32). When the Minister purloins it, he sets off a chain reaction of events. That same moment foreshadows the later discovery of the letter in the Minister’s possession. Says Lacan:

For the maneuvers which follow, however stealthily they prolong it, add nothing to that glance, nor does the deferring of the deed in the second scene break the unity of that moment. This glance supposes two others, which it embraces in its vision of the breach left in their fallacious complementarity, anticipating in it the occasion for larceny afforded by that exposure. Thus three moments, structuring three glances, born by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32).

The Minister takes advantage because he sees that the King is blind and that the Queen deludes herself that her indiscretion is invisible. Thus, as Žižek has suggested, the Lacanian gaze always implies a thirdness. That is, the action is played out before the blind King. When the Minister is eventually outsmarted by

Dupin, he moves into the position previously occupied by the Queen. He too sticks his head in the sand, captivated by a “dual relationship” in which he is “like an animal feigning death” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 44). He is, Lacan says, trapped in the dynamic of “seeing that he is not seen,” not realising that he is “seen not seeing”. He is in the same situation that he himself observed earlier. Just like the Queen, “he is now seen seeing himself not being seen” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 44).

Importantly, Lacan counters the role of the detective with the role of the psychoanalyst. In his own analysis, the psychoanalyst Lacan outwits the detective Dupin, revealing Dupin as a player in the very mystery he has set out to solve. Thus Lacan steps into the third position himself, exposing Dupin’s own unconscious desires, namely greed and a desire for power. Lacan’s seminar is in essence about the nature of psychoanalysis. In other words, the analyst – not the detective – has the key to unlocking the unconscious. He sees through our fantasy and exposes our own self-deception. He breaks our delusion with a well-placed word or comment, forcing us to acknowledge “the real” of our desires.

It is the letter as pure signifier that pushes the characters to move about in their various positions. As Lacan notes, their movements are determined “by the place which a pure signifier – the purloined letter – comes to occupy in their trio” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 32). However, it is the gaze that enables the Minister to take the letter, thus setting the letter “in sufferance” and the characters in motion.

Identifying the gaze is not a random academic exercise. In epistolary it allows us to examine the textual relationships that exist between characters, and beyond, to the relationship between author and reader. This allows us to identify the narrative structures and to see the epistolary mode as a frame which positions and plays off various characters according to their knowledge/power and presence/absence. From this place, we can explore more significant questions: to whom and for whom does the epistolary hero/heroine write? Where do the characters fit within the gaze and how does this operate to make epistolary such a seductive genre? Where is the signifier and how does it operate? What influence does this have on the author and on the reader? And what influence ultimately does this have on epistolary literature? Crucially, Lacan also asks:

To whom does a letter belong? Might a letter on which the sender retains certain rights then not quite belong to the person to whom is it addressed? Or might it be that the latter was never the real receiver? (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 41)

Armed with these questions, Lacan finds “illumination in what first seems to obscure matters” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 41). What he makes clear is that we never know who sent the letter to the Queen or indeed the nature of its contents. It is sufficient that the letter is “the symbol of a pact” and that its existence puts the Queen into a dilemma. Or as Lacan says, she is thrust into “a symbolic chain foreign to the one that constitutes her faith” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 42). He concludes that the signifier “determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their end and in their fate...” This, in essence, is

also Freud's discovery of the unconscious and Lacan's linguistic take on it. It is also the real reason for Lacan's analysis of Poe – to explain and illustrate the work of the unconscious for his students.

Lacan's seminar has considerable relevance for the study of letters in literature. I am interested in how the gaze manifests in the epistolary genre, such that the "voyeur himself is already in the picture" (Žižek 1992a, p. 175). How is the epistolary frame – a series of letters sent between two characters – used to ensnare the voyeuristic reader? What schisms exist between addresser, addressee and actual (unintended) receiver, such that possessing a purloined letter might determine a character's subsequent actions? And how is the reader positioned when invited to read a letter originally intended for a lover's eyes only?

By its nature, literature constructs a "subject position" for the reader. Reader response theory is a broad and dynamic field, and consideration of it is beyond the scope of this exegesis⁸. Suffice to say, readers are either placed "in a position of recognition and assent"; given a position that is "critical, dissociating"; or placed somewhere in between (Eagleton 1996, p. 104). That is, they are asked to give "a kind of consent while seeking simultaneously to undermine it" (Eagleton 1996, p. 104). French semiotician Roland Barthes' reflection of the role of the reader offers an intriguing alternative. Barthes understood that readers play an active, creative role, not a passive one. He divides the effect of a text into two somewhat amorphous

⁸ Given the limited word length of the exegesis, my focus has been limited to a detailed analysis of the development of the epistolary genre and an in-depth consideration of Lacan's gaze theory as it applies to the development of the epistolary genre in contemporary literature.

types – text of pleasure and text of *jouissance*. A text of pleasure, he argues, “contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, [that] is linked to a comfortable practice of reading”. A text of *jouissance*, or bliss, as the French is translated, “imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts...unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 1975, p. 14).

Barthes’ theory has relevance for epistolary literature. Traditionally, an author who chose the epistolary mode did so with the intention of giving more subjective realism to their story. According to Ruth Perry, epistolary fiction provides the reader with insight into the character’s state of consciousness, providing a “psychological angle of vision” that no other narrative form does (1980, p. 119). Yet the epistolary novel can also be disruptive and destabilizing – something that continues to be exploited in contemporary epistolary fiction. We find unreliable narrators, ruptures between addresser/addressee positions, and an upending of accepted social codes, such that epistolary novels tend to undermine rather than support the status quo. In *Atonement*, for example, we discover, only in the denouement, that Briony is writing a *fictional* account of her past, such that she is effectively rewriting her own family history. In *We Need To Talk About Kevin* we discover, also belatedly and with horror, that Eva is writing not to her estranged husband, but to her *dead* husband. And *In A Strange Room*, author Damon Galgut names the central character Damon, deliberately playing with the borders between fiction and non-fiction, memory and forgetting, truth and lie. Thus, the price for our desire – for our voyeuristic eyeball to the keyhole – does not come for free. A

Lacanian framework helps to illuminate these transgressive subject positions and modes of address with which I am concerned.

Lacan reads Freud and it is his enduring legacy. Yet his thinking exists in the orbit of linguistics and structuralism. To understand Lacan, it will be necessary to consider his theories within the framework of those who preceded and succeeded him. However Lacan's work stands apart because it applies language to the workings of the unconscious, bringing Freud's psychoanalytic theories into the literary world. It should be noted this exegesis does not attempt a psychoanalytic interpretation of the love letter – an endless search for the phallus or the breast. Rather the intention is to use Lacanian theory to illuminate the use of letters in literature, to better understand the letter as a literary device, and to explore how the author might 'shake' the letter so as to reveal its hidden secrets and truths.

In his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Slavoj Žižek makes the casual observation that one can detect changes in the *Zeitgeist* at the moment an artistic form becomes impossible (1992b, p. 48). The seismic shift in the way we communicate raises the question whether epistolary literature will struggle to find its future as a form in the 21st century. It would be madness to suggest an epistolary renaissance or even that the epistolary novel would again find any kind of mainstream prestige. Yet the genre endures, and its

characteristics have been mined by some of the most influential authors of our time. Why? This is the key question that motivates my thesis. In carrying out my work, I owe a great debt to Slavoj Žižek. He has carved a daring oeuvre using Lacan as a tool to understand popular culture, and vice versa. In particular, he has considered the Lacanian gaze as one of the secrets to unlocking the cinematic power of Alfred Hitchcock. I will use the Lacanian gaze as the key to understanding the enduring power of epistolary literature.

2. A brief history of epistolary literature

2.1 An overview of epistolary scholarship

Significant scholarly work is being done on the shift from handwritten letter correspondence to email and other CMCs. New technologies, notes David Henkin, have “altered our experiences of time and space and unsettled the boundaries separating persons, communities, and nations” (2006, p. 155). In less than two decades, the speed of communication has increased to a point where the time between sending and receiving a message is seconds. This technological change has been extraordinary in its ability to overcome physical distance, and has, more unexpectedly, created new platforms for social engagement. Naturally, this has opened up broad fields of academic research. In the social sciences, these include identity and authenticity, absence and presence (virtual, real or otherwise), and social and cultural cohesion. In her recent book *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence*, Esther Milne points out the impact of email on traditional letter correspondence has not been adequately explored, despite a flurry of research on digital technology itself (2010). She notes that in one key work on new epistolary directions, email is mentioned in the index only once⁹. An exception is Sunka Simon’s *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture*. However Simon herself places a caveat on the value of her contribution. She acknowledges her framework as strongly post-modernist and notes that the fictional texts she chooses “correspond without corresponding”. Her aim is to swim against the tide of literary theorists who choose texts for “profitable deconstruction” (2002, p. 16).

⁹ This text, *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, 2000, edited by Amanda Gilroy and WM Verhoeven, will be discussed below.

Linda Kauffman was the first to observe that epistolary conventions remain strong even as technology changes the mode of communication. On the cusp of the new century she wrote: “[E]pistolary innovators are cartographers, mapping the fin-de-millennium environment that is invisibly enveloping us” (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000, p. 216). Earlier, she had noted that epistolary had become a “destabilized and destabilizing category” undergoing “profound deformation and experimentation”, due to changes in communications technology (Kauffman 1986, p. 263). But given that most of Kauffman’s work predates the Internet, and that she has since moved on to other interests, there is much scope to continue questioning the boundaries of epistolary literature.

Epistolary scholarship divides roughly along two lines: the social and historical phenomenon of (non-fiction) letter writing and the (fictional) letter as a literary form. The two discourses are fluid. Scholars of “real letters” analyse historical letter collections through the lens of literature and vice versa. Some find it instructive to read both fiction and non-fiction together. Kaufmann identifies three questions common to all epistolary literature: to whom, for whom and why does one write? (1992, p. xxii). But as Janet Altman points out, the same themes, characters, narrative events and structures in epistolary literature can be found in real-life, historical letters.

[T]he basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter...significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works (1982, p. 4).

A small body of scholarship deliberately blends these two discourses. In *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, edited by Amanda Gilroy and WM Verhoeven, selected essays place emphasis on “cultural historical readings of epistolary texts” (2000, p. 14). This approach aims to avoid the disconnect between “public and private” and challenge the “boundaries of epistolarity” (p. 21). The editors note that letters are identifiable with different forms of “cultural capital” at different points in history. In her essay, Clare Brant advances this argument further, writing that the letters of Mary Queen of Scots can be read as both fiction and history, without being corralled into specific genres or even considering questions of truth. She describes Mary as a romantic figure, whose image has been constructed over time.

The love story is also about our feelings for the queen as much as hers for any man; she is object as much as agent (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000, p. 76).

Other writers working in the field also blur epistolary boundaries. In her book *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*, Mary Favret considers the epistolary novels of Jane Austen and Mary Shelley alongside the travel letters of Mary Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams (1993). Her aim is to show that the letter was not merely a private feminine domain, but a way that women gave themselves a public and political voice. Margaretta Jolly’s *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* explores the private letters of feminists in the 1970s and 80s in the same context as the epistolary novels of professional writers Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, AS Byatt and Jeanette Winterson (Jolly 2008). She deems letter writing a literary, social and political

practice, and a key strategy in the feminist movement. She sees feminist letters as “poignant texts”:

[A]lways straining towards an ideal yet shouting about the real, deeply romantic, and yet horribly ordinary in the failure of romance (Jolly 2008, p. 14).

This thesis concerns itself with (fictional) letters as a literary form. However, only one of the case studies is strictly epistolary in nature and another blurs the line between what can be considered fiction and non-fiction. This allows for an in-depth examination of the fluid evolution of epistolary literature and its continued influence on contemporary English literature today.

2.2 Jane Austen and the epistolary novel

Jane Austen is universally acknowledged for her sharp wit and close observation. Yet her eminence is in large part due to her role in the development of the English novel and her technical skill in bridging the gap between books that were written in letter format and a new prose style that informed the modern day novel.

In the 18th century, new ideas on individualism were permeating society. The rise of the novel reflected this, mirroring the shift from “objective, social and public” to the “subjective, individualist and private” (Watt 1957, p. 141). As literacy and leisure time increased, letter writing gained cult status. Letters went from being formal and commercial exchanges to private personal accounts of every day life. A penny post was established in Britain in 1680 and by the early 1820s was the cheapest, fastest and most reliable service in Europe. When Samuel Richardson,

a printer by trade, was asked to compile a letter-writing manual for publication, he became increasingly intrigued with the idea of answering his own model letters (Meltzer 1982, p. 517).

If the early epistolary novels of the 18th century were wildly popular, it is because they arose out of a form of writing available to most women. Women wrote letters and read them too. Moral tomes and books on good housekeeping were written in letter form. Thus the letter-writing heroines of Samuel Richardson's seminal epistolary novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) had what we would now describe as significant cultural capital because they "take up the pen to join a cultural correspondence" (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000, p. 2).

For Richardson, the epistolary form also proved a useful literary device. It allowed him direct access to the main character's thoughts and motivations – a "mirror on the breast", as it were¹⁰. According to Ian Watt, letters offered Richardson "a fuller and more convincing presentation of the inner lives of his characters...than literature had previously seen". Thus, while there are many more interesting literary characters than Pamela, "there are none whose daily thoughts and feelings we know so intimately" (Watt 1957, p. 141).

In *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt considers Defoe, Richardson and Fielding as the key founders of a "new kind of writing" – beneficiaries of social and literary conditions that led to the development of an innovative "realist" writing (1957, p. 4). For the

¹⁰ The English author Samuel Johnson wrote to his mistress Hester Thrale: "A man's letters...are the only mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives" (Watt 1957, p 191).

first time, writers presented the human condition *as it was*, turning away from myth and universal mores, and looking instead toward individual characters and their natural environment to provide authentic plots and a reflection of reality. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the novel emerged as the literary form that most closely reflected real life. It was, as Watt suggests, “a full and authentic report of human experience” (1957, p. 25).

Defoe, Richardson and Fielding gave this new form differing treatment. Defoe and Richardson pioneered what Watt describes as “realism of presentation” – each using distinctive narrative styles that imitated reality and offered the reader an intimate understanding of the character’s thoughts and emotions (Watt 1957, p. 230). Defoe’s novels are journalistic memoir style, characterised by people whose lives change according to the challenges imposed upon them. Samuel Richardson took this one step further, engaging readers with “*instantaneous* descriptions and reflections” at virtually every twist and turn in the narrative (Richardson 1964, p. v)¹¹. Fielding, who was critical of Richardson’s blow-by-blow narrative style (as can be seen in his parody *Shamela*) brought “realism of assessment” to the development of the novel. Instead of fostering an intimate relationship with the reader, as Richardson did, Fielding uses commentary, gaps in time, and contrasting scenes and characters to provide what Watt describes as “a stimulating wealth of suggestion and challenge on almost every topic of human interest... a wise assessment of life” (1957, p. 231). There are deficiencies in all three approaches of course. Defoe and Richardson are heavy going for today’s reader; Fielding seems blunt and obvious. Even their contemporaries found room for improvement. But to

¹¹ Watt notes that Richardson’s epistolary style did for the novel what DW Griffith’s close-ups did for film – “added a new dimension to the representation of reality” (p. 25).

the problems between realism of presentation and realism of assessment, Smollet, Sterne and Fanny Burney brought partial answers. Only Jane Austen could find perfect resolution:

She was able to combine into a harmonious unity the advantages both of realism of presentation and realism of assessment, of the internal and of the external approaches to character (Watt 1957, p. 237).

In Austen, Samuel Richardson found his greatest fan. She was a keen letter writer in private, like most women of her time, and wrote all her juvenilia in epistolary form¹². In 1817, just after her death, her brother Henry Austen wrote:

Richardson's power of creating, and preserving the consistency of his characters, as particularly exemplified in Sir Charles Grandison, gratified the natural discrimination of her mind, whilst her taste secured her from the errors of his prolix style and tedious narrative (Bray 2003, p. 109)¹³.

Indeed there is evidence that *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were first written as epistolary novels. (Bray 2003, pp. 112 - 115; Jack 1961). Ian Jack observes key characteristics of the epistolary novel in *Sense and Sensibility* and notes the importance of the letter in other Austen novels, including reference to letters written and received, use of comic relief, insight into character, plot

¹² The juvenilia *The Three Sisters*, *Lesley Castle*, *Love and Friendship* and *A Collection of Letters* were all in letter form, as was *Lady Susan*, the last of her early works in epistolary form, dated at 1793 or 1794.

¹³ See Bray for a more thorough discussion of Austen's familiarity with Richardson and in particular his third novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*. Bray notes that Austen's short play, entitled *Sir Charles Grandison*, is "full of detailed satirical references to specific moments in the novel and demonstrates a very precise knowledge of the original" (p. 109, 110).

development and suspense. However, with *Sense and Sensibility* Austen abandoned the form and not one of her published novels was written in letters.

Notes Ian Jack:

She must have become aware of the absurdities for which the epistolary novel was criticized...probably she regarded it as old-fashioned and suspected that readers of her day would find it long-winded (Jack 1961, pp. 174, 185).

Instead Austen charted a new course. Her innovation was the interior or narrated monologue, in which she blended the experiencing self and the narrating self. Thus she was able to read her characters' minds, while still maintaining third-person, authorial narration. Dorrit Cohn notes Austen took what was at the heart of epistolary fiction – namely intimacy – and took it into a style of third-person narration. In doing this, she turned the tide away from the epistolary novel (Cohn 1978, p. 113). She abandoned the narrator and wrote instead as a “confessed author” – analysing her characters more subtly than Fielding but without the literary devices employed by Defoe (memoir) and Richardson (letters) (Watt 1957, p. 237). Yet within her varied point of view and single main character, she continued to show her indebtedness to Richardson. Thus the intimacy and self-reflection remained, as she offered readers a “psychological closeness to the subjective world of the characters” (Watt 1957, p. 237).

2.3 Evolution of epistolary literature

Letter writing dates back to the ancients. It is quite literally as old as handwriting. From earliest times, letters were used to exchange written messages and as *aide-mémoire* among the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans (Classen

1988, p. 3). Indeed Kauffman begins her survey of epistolary literature in antiquity, noting that the same characteristics that define Ovid's *Heroides* also characterise contemporary epistolary literature. In the *Heroides* fifteen heroines write to an unnamed lover who has seduced, betrayed or abandoned them. Kauffman's assessment of *Heroides* provides a starting point for thinking about epistolary fiction.

Each letter is a confrontation, a demand, a plea, a lament: if the beloved were present, there would be no need to write. Each epistle repeats the pattern: the heroine challenges the lover to read her letter, rages against the forces that separated them, recalls past pleasures, speculates about his infidelity, laments his indifference, and discusses the sole act that engages her in his absence: writing. In many of the epistles, the heroine considers ending her life, but she avoids every sort of closure and dedicates herself to nurturing her illusions: of his presence, of his eventual return, of her own identity as his beloved, of their mutual passion (Kauffman 1986, pp. 17, 18).

The epistolary genre begins with *Letters From a Portuguese Nun* (1667) and extends, according to Kauffman, to recent novels such as *Possession* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Kauffman defines epistolary literature – “amorous epistolary discourse” as she calls it – broadly (1992, p. xiii). Her twin studies *Discourses of Desire* (1986) and *Special Delivery* (1992) established her as a leading voice in the epistolary field. As well as the 12th century letters of Abelard and Heloise, she includes in her discussion more philosophical works of literature such as

Barthes' *A Lovers Discourse* (1979) and Derrida's *The Post Card* (1980)¹⁴. Works that would not usually be considered epistolary feature too – Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Vladimir Nabakov's *Lolita* (1958). The broad scope of Kauffman's thinking informs my work, especially when it comes to considering what comprises contemporary epistolary literature. The characteristics of epistolary literature will be discussed in more detail below.

The usual starting point for any discussion of epistolary fiction is the 1669 *Letters From a Portuguese Nun*. When *The Portuguese Letters* appeared in English in 1678, they popularised the epistolary form. They also introduced readers to “a new departure in fiction – a long, complex story told (or suggested) in letters alone” (Day 1966, p. 146). Published in France in 1669, the letters were first translated into English in 1678, under the title *Love-Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* (Alcoforado 1956). They were purported to be a collection of five letters written by Mariana Alcoforada, a nun living in a convent in Portugal who had an affair with a French army officer. The letters were published anonymously and prompted a flood of copies and imitations. They display many of the characteristics which were to become the essence of the epistolary novel – exile, loneliness, betrayal, despair and the absent lover's trial-by-letter.

Why have you not written to me? I am much distressed if you have found no

¹⁴ Kauffman notes the letters of Abelard and Heloise were strangely influenced by the *Portuguese Letters* which appeared later in time. New translations, adaptations and commentary of the lovers' 12th century letters were “enchanted” by the later *Portuguese Letters*, though it is unlikely that their suspected author, the Frenchman Vicomte de Guilleragues, drew on them. Kauffman explores the uncertainty that exists around their provenance but notes their literary history “demonstrates the dialogic dynamism of the amorous epistolary discourse from Latin to French to English, stretching back to the *Heroides* and forward to the *Portuguese Letters*” (1986, pp. 84-87).

single Occasion since your Departure! And I am much more so, if you have found one and still have not written. Your Cruelty and Ingratitude are extreme; but I should be distracted were they to bring you to Disaster, and I much prefer that they should go unpunished than be revenged for them. Against all Appearances I will not believe that you care Nothing for me, and I feel far more inclined to abandon myself to my Passion for you, than to complain of your Neglect (Alcoforado 1956, p. 17).

Almost from the outset Mariana Alcoforado was suspected as a fake. In his introduction to the 1956 translation, British literary critic Raymond Mortimer cites doubts raised by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed the writer to be a man, and the Cambridge Professor of French, FC Green, who suspected a savvy publisher of deliberately printing the letters anonymously and thus creating a storm of interest (Alcoforado 1956, pp. 9, 10). Intriguingly the poet Rainer Maria Rilke believed the letters to be historical, as did Stendhal. That was the general sentiment at the time of their publication too (Chernaik 1998, p. 13; Day 1966, p. 33; Goldstein 1997, pp. 578, 579). Remarkably, Mortimer himself could not believe they were fiction. He concluded the jury was still out:

Desperate love has never been voiced more movingly than in these letters
(Alcoforado 1956, p. 5).

In 1972, the tide turned. A new French edition of the nun's letters claimed they were written under the hand of Gabriel de Lavergne, the Vicomte de Guilleragues.

Deloffre and Rougeot's edition is not available in translation but Bray notes that the letters were subsequently attributed to Guilleragues (Bray 2003, p. 138). Claire Goldstein questions Deloffre and Rougeot's authority, saying despite their attempt at rigorous scholarly investigation, their key claim rests on the apparent 'paternity' of the text. However Warren Chernaik argues that Deloffre and Rougeot show conclusively that Guilleragues authored the novel. He says *The Portuguese Letters*, and the later *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, were both successful literary hoaxes – works of fiction that seduced readers into believing they were reading a true account of a real love affair (1998, p. 2).

The Portuguese Letters took the epistolary genre in a new direction. Aphra Behn, Mary de la Rivere Manley, Jane Barker, Mary Davys and Eliza Haywood were among the startling number of authors to pen spin-offs and sequels, all inspired by illicit love affairs between naïve nuns and brave soldiers, and each more popular than the last (Day 1966, p. 195; Kauffman 1986, p. 96; Singer 1963, pp. 47 - 57). Most notable was Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. Published anonymously between 1684 and 1687, the work consisted of three parts. Part one is entirely devoted to love letters between the nobleman Philander and his sister-in-law Silvia, while the other parts are a blend of love letters and prose summaries. The letters are 'framed' by an introductory "argument" which is presumably intended to have been written by Behn or an editor. The letters were found, the reader is told, and then published. Though presented as fictional, this gives them the 'authority' of historical document.

After their flight these letters were found in their cabinets, at their house at St Denis, where they both lived together, for the space of a year; and they are as exactly as possible placed in the order they were sent, and were those supposed to be written towards the latter end of their amours (Behn 2005).

The scintillating novel proved a hit with the public. Chernaik describes the novel as “a peek through the keyhole, with a bit of incest for piquancy” (1998, p. 14). Robert Adams Day says it was the “first original English novel entirely in epistolary form” and attributes to it a “technical virtuosity” – skillful handling of plot, good use of point of view and compelling character development (1966, pp. 146, 161). It makes compelling reading, even today. Each letter ends with a melodramatic sign-off – “The lost Philander”, “unfortunate Sylvia”, the “wretched and despairing Sylvia” etc – and the urgency of the character’s lovemaking can still succeed in getting modern readers hot under the collar.

To SYLVIA

What power with-holds me then from rushing on thee, from pressing thee with kisses; folding thee in my transported arms, and following all the dictates of love without respect or awe! What is it, oh my Sylvia, can detain a love so violent and raving, and so wild; admit me, sacred maid, admit me again to those soft delights, that I may find, if possible, what divinity (envious of my bliss) checks my eager joys, my raging flame; while you too make an experiment (worth the trial) what 'tis makes Sylvia deny her
Impatient adorer,

PHILANDER.

*My page is ill, and I am oblig'd to trust Brilliard with these to the dear
cottage of their rendezvous; send me your opinion of his fidelity: and ah!
remember I die to see you* (Behn 2005).

In his discussion of these three key works – *The Portuguese Nun*, *Love-Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* and *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* – Chernaik identifies issues of authenticity and truth that have surrounded all three since their publication. He rejects as unhelpful distinctions between fiction and non-fiction:

Any attempt to distinguish sharply between what is now accepted as fiction and as fact would seriously misrepresent a genre which in this period includes a collection of letters by a real nun, Heloise, turned into romantic fiction by translators and adapters, another group of letters by an invented nun, Mariana Alcoforado, almost universally assumed for two centuries to be a historical document, and a roman a clef told largely in letters, where the hero and heroine, Philander and Sylvia, are transparently based on the leading figures in a contemporary scandal, but where the pulsations of feeling charted in the exchange of letters are entirely authorial inventions (1998, p. 3).

This observation has relevance for contemporary epistolary literature. What we can draw from Chernaik's argument is that the epistolary genre is both robust and porous. As a genre, it is like the cell wall of a living organism – tough, yet flexible

and permeable. The epistolary genre has a similar quality. Kauffman's broad definition – and others like it – provide parameters inside which there is room to move¹⁵. Epistolary literature can be fiction, non-fiction, or somewhere in between. It can be told in letters or merely draw on letter writing's characteristics. Its ability to shift and move and morph has ensured its longevity. Just like the letter itself, the epistolary novel has changed greatly in style and form. Whereas we once wrote letters on scraps of papyrus, we now write on portable electronic devices. Similarly, the long meandering prose that characterised Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* has given way to the more dynamic, succinct style found in contemporary English novels. Yet modern writers whose work falls with the epistolary genre still draw on the same inherent characteristics.

The popularity of epistolary literature waned in the 19th century. Yet Kauffman identifies a “prodigious” number of 20th century epistolary novels (1992, p. xxv). Some show internal psychological struggle, such as in Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) and John Updike's *S* (1988). Others create a sense of forbidden reading and writing, as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). More recently, in novels such as *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *Atonement*, the process of letter writing allows the central character to come to terms with a traumatic event in their past.

Of course, the term novel is a slippery fish. Novel implies fiction and fiction implies something made up or fabricated. But novels are not by definition fictive, as the American writer Joel Agee argues. He defines novels as works of literature whose

¹⁵ See for example other definitions in Bray (2003), Cousineau (1997), Altman (1982) and Day (1966).

contents are “shaped” rather than “invented” (2007, p. 57). This, he argues, renders the arbitrary categories of fiction and non-fiction in English literature problematic. The influential writing teacher John Gardner describes fiction as a “persuasive imitation of reality”, saying it mines truths without necessarily being ‘the truth’, and seeks to maintain “the effect of the dream” in the reader’s mind (1991, pp. 31, 176). Lennard Davis notes that classics such as *Don Quixote* become so beloved that even in modern times, people see a horse and cry out: “There goes Rocinante”. Thus, argues Davis, the magical blending of fantasy and reality can have an influence that extends far beyond the fictional narrative (1983, p. 18). This issue of fiction and non-fiction is flagged here because it has relevance to Kauffman’s broad definition of epistolary literature, and thus to my own consideration of what is epistolary. It is especially relevant in my selection of the case study *In A Strange Room* and will also be considered in relation to my own creative work. Crucially, it is a theme which emerges continually in any discussion of epistolary literature – both in the books themselves and the relevant scholarship.

It is relevant too that in contemporary times the debate over the split between fiction and non-fiction has reached fever pitch in the literary world. Most recently, entertainer Mike Daisey’s fictionalised report about the mistreatment of Apple workers in China was broadcast on National Public Radio’s *This American Life*. It was later removed from the online archives and a comprehensive retraction aired after producers discovered holes in Daisey’s story¹⁶. Writer James Frey was publicly castigated by talk show host Oprah Winfrey after she discovered his

¹⁶ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/blog/2012/03/retracting-mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory> (Accessed June 27, 2012)

“memoir” *A Million Little Pieces* was fiction¹⁷. And Helen Garner’s controversial book *The Spare Room*, which closely mirrored real life events, has been criticised for its presentation as a novel.

Of course, impassioned cries that the novel is dead are nothing new. Such debates have been happening for almost a century¹⁸. Yet there is no doubt that the publishing industry, and literature with it, is changing in a way we have not seen since the invention of the printing press. A rise in e-book sales has stemmed the tide away from print books, yet book sales are falling rather than rising. Fiction is most at risk, with novel sales dropping most notably¹⁹. The novel must compete to survive.

How then are novelists to survive? How do they infuse their fiction with realism? How do they produce writing that is enthralling, engaging and relevant? And how do they offer readers a glimpse behind the keyhole, in a world where virtually nothing is private or sacred anymore?

Voyeurism may provide an answer here. The human compulsion to look and watch – Lacan’s scopic drive – is the driving force behind the success of novels like *A Million Little Pieces* and *The Spare Room*, which take readers into a hidden space that is secretive and unknown. It is the same desire that made 18th century epistolary novels popular. It has also turned 1950s Hitchcock films into classics and makes

¹⁷ <http://www.oprah.com/showinfo/James-Frey-After-the-Million-Little-Pieces-Controversy-Part-1> (Accessed June 27, 2012)

¹⁸ See for example Walter Benjamin “The Crisis of the Novel” (1930) in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing Volume II: 1927 – 1934*. Tom Wolfe also criticised the novel in his 1975 book, *The New Journalism*.

¹⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/may/02/rise-ebook-sales-decline-print-titles> (Accessed June 27, 2012)

YouTube clips of dancing prisoners go viral. How can the novelist tap into this voyeurism? How can they anticipate the viewer's gaze? How can they seduce the voyeur?

Voyeurism, then, emerges as a common thread in a discussion about literature in general and epistolary literature in particular. In the 18th century, epistolary fiction took readers into private thoughts and private lives in a way that had never been done before. The same principle applies to recent technological phenomena – think YouTube, blogging, Facebook, Twitter and reality television. Until recently, novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, journalists and documentarians were the gatekeepers of a glimpse into 'the Other'. Now we have citizen journalism and a generation of teenagers who have grown up broadcasting themselves from their own bedrooms. The American actress Lena Dunham sums it up nicely. She relates a conversation with her father, who finds the concept of Twitter "infinitely unrelatable":

He's like, 'Why would I want to tell anybody what I had for a snack, it's private?!' And I'm like, 'Why would you even have a snack if you didn't tell anybody? Why bother eating?' ('Please RT' 2012)

We are at a timely juncture in history to consider the epistolary novel. The discussion is timely because technological change is impacting on literature at rapid speed. The impact on literature is at once real and uncertain. We are seeing a profound and, most likely, irreversible shift in the way we consume literature and

the platforms on which it is presented. Remarkable change has occurred even since this research project commenced.

The development of the novel owes much to epistolary literature. And as we will see, the influence continues. Through an understanding of the epistolary genre – and how it relates to the Lacanian concept of the gaze – we can learn more about how spectacle is staged and unfolded for the reader. Just as in a Hitchcock film, the entire spectacle of the epistolary novel is played out before the reader's beady eye. The same voyeuristic "through the keyhole" approach to storytelling that inspired readers in the 1800s can continue to breathe life into literature today.

2.4 Key epistolary works of the 18th and 19th centuries

Such was the popularity of 17th century epistolary literature that a new literary genre quickly emerged. Publishers began to draw on women's so-called 'private letters' as a source of new writing. And by the eighteenth century, male authors had begun publicly appropriating the female voice, including the most famous epistolary authors of the era – Laclos, Rousseau and Richardson (Goldsmith 1989, p. viii).

If *Letters from a Portuguese Nun* was the single most important influence on the epistolary novel, then Samuel Richardson was the second (Day 1966, pp. 113, 116). *Pamela* was published in 1740 and the seven volumes of the first edition of *Clarissa* were published in three installments during the twelve months from December 1747 to December 1748. Richardson's third novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* was published in 1753. According to Day, Richardson drew on early epistolary literature and brought new mastery to the technique:

Richardson developed all the fictional methods exploited only fitfully and tentatively by earlier writers, used them simultaneously, and integrated them into long and important works (Day 1966, p. 210).

Between them, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* inspired a literary trend that lasted, at its height, almost 50 years. Even at the time, Richardson saw himself as the founder of a new form of writing. In his introduction to *Clarissa: Preface, Hints of Prefaces, and Postscript*, RF Brissenden notes that Richardson knew what he had achieved. It was, Brissenden notes, of “sufficient magnitude and novelty to demand some theoretical defence and explanation”. Richardson thus commissioned critics who could express “the truth about his masterpiece” (Richardson 1964, p. ii). Jean Baptiste de Freval, a Frenchman living in London, for whom Richardson was printing a book, wrote an introductory letter to the first edition of *Pamela*. The letters, de Freval noted, were written under the “immediate Impression of every Circumstance which occasioned them” and “to those who had a Right to know the fair Writer’s most secret Thoughts” (Richardson 1964, p. iv). Richardson also called on the Reverend Philip Skelton, who wrote: “[I]t is another kind of Work, or rather a new Species of Novel...it is a Work of a new kind among us” (Richardson 1964, p. iv). Richardson articulated his own goals in his personal correspondence too. He wanted to give his readers access to the inner most thoughts and deeds of his characters. In a letter to Lady Bradshaigh in 1754 he wrote:

Ye World is not yet used to this way of writing, to the moment. It knows not that in the minutiae lie often the unfoldings of the Story, as well as of the

heart; & judges of an action undecided, as it if were absolutely decided
(Carroll 1964, p. 289).

And in his own preface to *Clarissa*, he wrote:

All the letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (Richardson 1964, p. vi).

Writing “to the moment” set Richardson’s work apart. So too his desire to access his characters most intimate thoughts and feelings. Indeed it was this aspect that interested and intrigued Jane Austen, and which carried through into her development of the narrated monologue. Never before had readers been able to share in such intimate details of the characters’ lives. They were invited into an imaginary world that closely mirrored their own, yet at the same time was vastly more interesting. As Frances Jeffery wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1804:

With Richardson we slip invisible into the domestic privacy of his characters, and hear and see everything that is said and done to them (in Watt, p. 140).

Most intriguing, for our purposes, is the voyeurism that characterises Richardson’s novels. Watt argues that Richardson projected his own fantasies onto the lives of his characters and staged scenes that were tantalising and hypnotic for his readers. He was clever enough to avoid censorship. But his “through the keyhole” approach nonetheless subjected the reader to violence, abduction, seduction and rape.

The privacy and anonymity of print placed the reader behind a keyhole where he, too, could peep in unobserved and witness rape being prepared, attempted

and carried out (Watt 1957, p. 160).

The 18th century was a time of much personal writing, largely due to the rise of the postal service. Samuel Richardson's brilliance was not necessarily in his writing ability, rather in his understanding and reflection of what was happening in society. As Godfrey Singer writes: "the greatness of Richardson was in his employment of what was already a common desire of the vast majority of the reading public" (1963, p. 102).

From England, the epistolary novel spread across Europe. In Germany, it developed in a diary style. In France it emerged as what Altman describes as a kind of verbal dual:

Whereas the German and English traditions tend to opt for the static method of narration (confidential letters), using language to present a seemingly unmediated transcription of internal and external reality, the French tradition of letter writing prefers the kinetic method (dramatic letters), in which the letter is used as a weapon and a mask (Altman 1982, p. 94).

However, the great epistolary novels brought more than pure style to the literary table. Rather they were influential works in their own right, with something other than epistolary to mark them out for literary significance (Singer 1963). Rousseau's *Julie ou la nouvelle Heloise*, for example, is recognised for its philosophical and moral underpinnings. In 1774 Goethe's epistolary *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* emerged as a work of social protest, railing against class inequality. And in

England, Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) reflected ordinary domestic life for the first time, thus laying "the corner stone of the domestic novel of the century" (Singer 1963, p. 110).

One novel stands out as a triumph of both style and substance: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Written by a French military officer, Choderlos de Laclos, and first published in 1782, it is the story of the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, rivals and former lovers who make a game of recounting their conquests to each other in letters. Throughout the novel letters are written by various characters, though the letters between the Marquise and the Vicomte dominate. Altman notes that the novel's place in the literary canon has brought interest to the epistolary form simply because it is impossible to ignore its letter format in any analysis of the work as a whole. As scriptwriter Christopher Hampton makes clear, it is one of the great literary feats²⁰:

In many respects [Laclos] is the perfect author: he wrote, at around age forty, one piece of fiction, which was not merely a masterpiece, but the supreme example of its genre, the epistolary novel; and then troubled the public no further (Hampton 1985, p. 7).

Laclos' book is an elegant, hilarious, compelling, deftly plotted and fast-paced page-turner. Singer notes Laclos executed his work with a finesse that outshone any of his contemporaries:

²⁰ The 1988 Hollywood film *Dangerous Liaisons* starring Michelle Pfeiffer, Glenn Close and John Malkovich was based upon Christopher Hampton's play, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

It contains less actual sentiment, less actual sensibility, and more sex...(1963, p. 136).

Indeed few 18th century novelists have the power to captivate a modern audience like Laclos, particularly because our notions of sex and sexuality have changed so dramatically. However Laclos might well have been writing about Sydney in the 21st century as Paris in the 18th. The cruel cunning of the Marquise and the Vicomte is masterfully drawn, as are the goings-on of French society in general. The pleasure that Laclos must have taken in crafting the delicious language of the letters is evident to the reader. But the novel is purposefully self-conscious too, evoking the very writerliness of the form. The Vicomte, for example, urges the Marquise to attend to her style:

You can see that when you write to someone it is for him and not for yourself; you ought then to try less to say what you are thinking than to say what will please him more (p. 257).

Laclos shows how a letter can serve as the first arrow in battle. The letter as signifier – as Lacan would later discover in Poe. As Francoise Meltzer notes, citing Lacan, just accepting a letter is an accession of power and the beginning of a chain reaction in which “a letter always arrive at its destination” (1982, p. 518). This was nothing new to Laclos’ Vicomte:

I was not very surprised when she refused to take this letter, which I merely offered her; that would have been granting something and I expect a longer defence (p. 72).

Ian Watt provides a rare dissent to Laclos’ generally accepted greatness. He argues

the self-consciousness sets *Les Liaisons dangereuses* outside the tradition of the novel. It is “too stylish to be authentic” and does not maintain the reader’s suspension of disbelief. Despite his remarkable character insights and masterful style, Watts argues that Laclos was the antithesis of Defoe and Richardson, who despite their occasionally “graceless and vulgar writing” succeeded in crafting a “transcription of real life” (1957, p. 24).

Madame Bovary (1856) deserves mention too. Though not written in letter form, letters play a crucial role in reinforcing themes of deceit, betrayal and hidden lives. Flaubert was also influenced by Goethe’s *Young Werther* (Goethe 2004, p. xii).

From *Madame Bovary*, we can learn much of the nature of the letter in literature. We see Rodolphe with an old Rheims biscuit box, in which he keeps his stash of love letters. When he opens it, there is a rush of “damp dust and withered roses” (p. 212). Among the letters from Emma he finds letters that are “brief, practical, business-like” but what he seeks are “the longer ones that she had written in the early days” (p. 213). In the box he finds other signifiers of love: “bouquets, a garter, a black mask, pins, locks of hair” (p. 213). As in *Zoo*, the letter stands in for the absent lover, it is the physical manifestation of love.

As he dallied with these souvenirs, he examined the handwriting of the letters and their style, both as varied as their spelling. A word would bring back a face, a gesture, a tone of voice; but sometimes he could recall nothing (p. 213).

We also see in *Madame Bovary* the impotency of love letters. Ultimately, the letter is a sign that the love affair is doomed:

They began to talk more of things indifferent to their love. Emma's letters were all about flowers, poetry, the moon and the stars – ingenious shifts of an enfeebled passion endeavouring to recoup its powers from any and every external source (p. 293).

In the canon of epistolary fiction, two key works are frequently forgotten. Black mentions Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) only in passing, among the revival period of the early 1800s (1940, p. 110). Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) – partly letters and partly diary entries – is mentioned briefly in Singer's discussion of epistolary novels after 1800. For Singer, the occasional emergence of the epistolary novel shows the genre is more than mere novelty (1963, p. 212).

Its tendencies, its manifestations, its uses are everywhere analogous, and thus established for fiction the universality of the letter as a literary and personal accessory of immense worth and palpable convenience (p. 214).

Frankenstein offers a cunning criticism of the British empire through the very literary device that allowed imperialism to flourish, namely the letter (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000, p. 13). The letter in *Frankenstein* stands in for truth, persuading the reader as to the authenticity of the story. The letters Captain Robert Walton writes to his sister are intimate and confessional, and a vehicle for telling the story of *Frankenstein* in a manner that is believable and real. When *Frankenstein* learns what Walton has written, he makes amendments, again reinforcing the documentary quality of letters in fiction:

“Since you have preserved my narration,” said he, “I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity” (Shelley 1994, p. 266).

Dracula comprises “found” documents collated by an editor. The “writing down” attests to truth and accuracy. Singer derides the novel as a “thriller” but notes the letter technique is “excellent”.

In their fullness, their attention to detail; their differences in style with each different correspondent; their record, not only of the main thread of terror in the story but also of the small excursions of human life and thought, they seem to acquire a sort of eighteenth-century completeness (1963, p. 171).

The epistolary craze reached its height in the second half of the 18th century in England. In 1763, one in four fictional works were letter novels and by 1770, 18 out of 26 novels were epistolary. The annual production of epistolary novels peaked in 1785, then quickly declined (Black 1940; Singer 1963). Then, in 1786, almost as quickly as it began, the obsession was over. The public appetite for sentimental writing waned, and with it epistolary fiction (Singer 1963, p. 102). Black puts the rapid decline down to improved narrative techniques that gave writers more freedom with point of view. As we have already seen, dialogue became more important, as did interior, internal thought processes. Writers such as Austen began to see letter exchange as “cumbersome and artificial” (Black 1940, p. 110). The glory days of the epistolary novel were over.

2.5 Key epistolary works of the 20th century

Through the 20th century, epistolary novels have appeared sporadically. Some, like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, John Updike’s *S*, William Golding’s *Rites of Passage* and Fay Weldon’s *Letters to Alice* construct their narrative from fictional

letters. Others, like LP Hartley's *The Go-Between*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* draw on the central themes and motifs of epistolary literature. The second category is representative of a move towards a contemporary epistolary genre. Each narrative is written in the first person – or in the case of *Herzog* from the point of view of the central character – and in each one a protagonist maintains a fictional correspondence with another character. A few noteworthy examples are discussed below.

In *The Go-Between* (1958), we see the love letter as signifier. The letters are “precious missives” that determine the action and propel the characters to respond in certain ways. Their content is kept secret and becomes all the more secretive because young Leo, the messenger, does not know what is contained in them. He is the blind innocent – the King in Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. Later, he “purloins” one of the letters. He reads the first three lines of the unsealed letter, revealing to himself – and the reader – the affair between Ted and Marion.

No wonder she wanted to keep it secret. Instinctively, to cover her shame, I thrust the letter deep into the envelope and sealed it. Yet it must be delivered
(Hartley 1958, p. 112).

The story is set in the summer of Leo's 13th birthday. What is at first not understood by the child Leo comes to be understood by Leo the teenager. The novel is in essence a letter, written by the elderly Leo Colston to himself – he takes up the pen “to put my memories away” (p. 263). He wants to understand, explain, confess and

heal, to understand what happened that summer and the impact it would have on his life. Hence the famous opening line:

The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there (p. 7).

Nabokov's *Lolita* owes much to the epistolary tradition. The address is made to numerous addressees – including Lolita, minor characters and the “ladies and gentlemen” of the jury – thus the book becomes both confession and atonement.

*(Jean, whatever, wherever you are, in minus timespace or plus soultime,
forgive me all this, parenthesis included)* (Nabokov 2010, p. 98).

His writing is secret, furtive, evil – *I retired to my lair, and wrote letters* (p. 60) – and he locks his “love letters” in an ugly little “imitation mahogany” table, which like her own daughter, will soon be raped by Charlotte. Humbert makes love to the page, as he would wish to make love to Lolita.

*Don't think I can go on. Heart, head, everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita,
Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer* (p. 103).

We see the trial motif, the loneliness of letter writing, and the creation of a false self – a self who claims to love Lolita but in fact only loves himself (Kauffman 1992). Indeed, like Shklovsky in *Zoo* and, as we will see, the narrators in *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *Atonement*, Humbert (read Nabokov) is first and foremost a writer. We are so beguiled by Humbert's spectacular language and sparkling prose that

when he rapes his step-daughter Lolita, we are left marvelling at his melodic words rather than his vile act:

There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of colour, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child
(Nabokov 2010, p. 127).

In *Herzog* (1964), Saul Bellow uses letters to reach into his character's unconscious. As Bray notes, Bellow shows how keenly the letter can reveal "internal struggle and turbulent psychological conflict" (2003, p. 132).

Instead of answering he wrote mentally, Dear Ramona, Very dear Ramona. I like you very much, dear to me, a true friend. It might even go farther. But why is it that I, a lecturer, can't bear to be lectured? I think your wisdom gets me (1964, p. 22).

...

But at the silent moment at which he faced Ramona he wrote, incapable of replying except by mental letter, You are a great comfort to me (p. 23).

Herzog's letters show the character's mental decline. But through taking up the pen, he writes himself into sanity. In the final passage, he has no messages for anyone. His brain is clear, calm. Through writing he has healed himself, and delivered himself into freedom.

In a few minutes he could call to her, “Damp it down Mrs Tuttle. There’s water in the sink.” But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word (p. 348).

Fay Weldon in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (1984) chooses the epistolary form as a means of celebrating writing. The letter is her ‘first draft’ and thus has the element of freshness and realism to it. Her professional writing, she attests, has always gone through a third and fourth draft.

It is a properly formulated vision of the world. But myself living, talking, giving advice, writing this letter, is only please remember in first draft (p. 10).

The subtext here is clear. We might not trust the novelist, but the letter writer surely we can trust. Nonetheless Weldon is a fraudulent narrator. As real as the premise sounds, there is no niece, no Alice – she is a fictional character. We will see the fraudulent narrator arise in all three case studies below.

Like many epistolary writers, Weldon pays tribute to her literary forefathers. She urges her niece to read Fielding and Richardson, but it is clear that she considers Jane Austen more worthy. In reference to Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* she writes:

I have not read it. If you will read it, Alice, and let me know what it is like, I will pay you £50. I believe that reading books you do not really want to read, like looking after children you do not really want to look after, should be a

very highly paid occupation indeed. It is an assault to the human spirit (p. 82).

Weldon also provides an apt assessment of the epistolary novel:

To accomplish a letter novel successfully requires a special skill, the skill of a born dramatist – the knack of moving a plot along through the mouths of the protagonists and laying down the plot detail, as it is called, without apparently doing so: the body has to be fleshed but the bones not allowed to show (p.50).

2.6 Key characteristics of epistolary literature

Although the epistolary genre has evolved markedly, the same basic characteristics are still to be found. Contemporary literary scholars identify as among its key qualities: a “transparent, spontaneous outpouring of emotion” (Bray 2003, p. 29); an ability to lend fiction a “documentary status” and to “personalize history” (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000, p. 51); and “voice of true feeling...testaments to sincerity, authenticity and spontaneity” (Kauffman 1992, p. xviii). These characteristics and others will be discussed in detail below.

At first glance, epistolary literature may be defined very simply as ‘written in letters’. Day suggests this working definition:

Any prose narrative, long or short, largely or wholly imaginative, in which letters, partly or entirely fictitious, serve as the narrative medium or figure significantly in the conduct of the story (1966, p. 5).

But such a simple summary betrays the complex set of characteristics that mark out the epistolary genre, both in its purest and most amorphous form.

Kauffman, in *Special Delivery*, identifies the characteristics found in traditional epistolary literature. These include writing in the absence of the beloved, mourning the inadequacies of language, transgressing generic boundaries, subverting gender roles and staging revolt through the act of writing. The same qualities can be found in contemporary novels such as *Lolita* and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1992, p. xiii). Though not strictly epistolary in nature, many contemporary novels continue to draw on the epistolary tradition. Kauffman's point is that the epistolary characteristics remain identifiable, even when incorporated into non-epistolary narrative prose. In other words, a selection of contemporary English literary works retain the distinctive stamp of the epistolary tradition, even as what we know as 'the novel' has morphed and transformed itself. As she writes:

The very looseness of its conventions has made it resilient, adaptable and relevant in diverse historical epochs (Kauffman 1992, p. xiv).

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel is presented as a transcription of tapes recorded by a young woman who lives in the futuristic Republic of Gilead. The tapes are found in the year 2195 and presented to an academic conference on Gilead. Letters do not feature in the narrative; however, the novel is written in the first person and presented from the perspective of a fictional female correspondent. The writing is essentially a dialogue between the narrator

Offred and a specific addressee – possibly her partner Luke or a future saviour, a “vast audience...a future...human race” (Kauffman 1992, p. 224). Offred grapples with what is fiction and what is fact. In the end, even the letter is only a reconstruction of events, sent to someone who may or may not receive it.

You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous...I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good because I know you can't (Atwood, p. 49).

In addition to the traditional characteristics, contemporary epistolary literature features a number of central motifs. These include individualism, romantic love, representation of society and dialogism (Kauffman 1992, pp. xvii - xix). Yet what is distinctive about works that draw on the epistolary tradition is that they in fact deliberately set out to undermine these motifs. Thus, romantic love is mocked, the authority of the individual is challenged, the universality of the family is questioned, the representation of society is presented as little more than a construct and the realism, authenticity and intimacy of the letter itself is questioned. The dialogue, Kauffman suggests, that exists between addresser and addressee is “doubled” as contemporary writers address the epistolary writers of the past. But the dialogue is not a straightforward one:

[W]hile each new contribution to a genre bears a “family resemblance” to its predecessors, it engages in “dialogic” contestation with them...it posits an

alternative logic, it eschews resolution and closure, it depicts ideologues in conflict, it creates an open-ended dialogue that encourages further innovation...Shklovsky writes to Rousseau, Nabokov to Poe, Barthes to Werther, Derrida to Joyce, Lessing to Laing, Walker to Hurtson, Atwood to Hawthorne... (Kauffman 1992, p. xix).

What are the classic conventions of epistolary then?

Traditionally, epistolary fiction's most crucial characteristic has been Richardson's concept of "writing to the moment". Ruth Perry describes it as writing in "uncensored streams of consciousness":

Thoughts are seemingly written down as they come, without any effort to control their logic or structure. Characters talk to themselves, reflect, think out loud – on paper (Perry 1980, p. 128).

Writing to the moment takes readers into the character's head. As Bray writes:

Thus the letter becomes a passport not to the objectivity of sense impressions but to the subjectivity of mind (Bray 2003, p. 7).

Samuel Richardson chose letters for this specific purpose. Letters, he concluded, had the ability to "lead us farther into the Recesses of the human Mind, than the colder and more general Reflections suited to a continued and more contracted Narrative". Letters offered "the only natural Opportunity" of showing the influence

that “*Things present* are known to make upon the Minds of those affected by them” (Richardson 2009, p. 6).

Other key epistolary characteristics appear time and time again. These include the creation of the self and identification of the Other; confession and appeal; presence and absence; exile and longing; desire and the fulfillment of desire through writing; frustrations with language; and death or self-annihilation. Here we can turn to Shklovsky’s *Zoo* as a text in which all these characteristics can be usefully explored.

These days, the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky is better remembered as a critic than a novelist. But in 1923 he published a remarkable epistolary work. In *Zoo or Letters not about Love*, Shklovsky writes to his estranged lover Alya. In this simple line from one of his love letters, we learn both the riddle and charm of epistolary literature.

You write about me – for yourself; I write about myself – for you (1971, p. 78).

In *Zoo*, we see Shklovsky use traditional epistolary characteristics to reclaim and transform the epistolary genre. Though the novel is written in letters, Shklovsky transgresses the genre to such an extent – mocking both the depth of his love and his writing ability – that Kauffman suggests the genre was never quite the same again (Kauffman 1992, p. xix). In his introduction to *Zoo*, Richard Sheldon argues Shklovsky’s novel revived and reinvented the genre, but with a twist, since the object of Shklovsky’s desire banned him from talking of love.

Elsa's [Shklovsky's real-life girlfriend] prohibition of this subject forces Shklovsky to renovate the genre by substituting unconventional material – not only the portraits, but also an elegy, urban landscapes, a dramatic fantasy, as well as essays on literary theory and criticism (Shklovsky 1971, p. xxviii).

In his preface, Shklovsky discusses the essential question that must concern every epistolary author. Namely, why are these characters writing to each other?

The usual motivation is love and partings. I took the following variant of this motivation: the letters are being written by a man in love with a woman who has no time for him (p. 3).

Thus *Zoo*, like *Abelard and Heloise*, is an anti-love letter. Or as the subtitle would have it, an epistolary novel not about love. In fact Shklovsky goes further, indebted himself to the epistolary past and further subtitling his book *The Third Heloise* – a reference to Abelard and Heloise but also Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau's epistolary novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise* (1761). It is not uncommon for contemporary epistolary fiction to reference the epistolary past, as Kauffman has indicated. Indeed Shklovsky references every epistolary work when he writes:

Tragic endings – at the very least, a broken heart – are inevitable in an epistolary novel (p. 64).

We will see both these same anti-generic underpinnings, as well as nods to the

epistolary past, when we consider *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, *Atonement*, and *In A Strange Room*.

Intimacy – or the suggestion of it – naturally underlies every work of epistolary literature. The writer relives past pleasures, mourns the pains of abandonment and attempts to persuade the lover to return. In doing this, and in marking time until Alya's return, Shklovsky seems to be addressing himself and her:

Be patient. Think about something else, about other important and unhappy people. There is no harm in loving. And tomorrow perhaps the corporal of the guard will come again. But how long will my term of guard duty be?

Interminable – I'm serving in an unofficial capacity (p. 36).

But inherent in the love letter is the lack of intimacy. The lover is absent and her return is not guaranteed. Intimacy is either remembered or a fantasy. Through the writing process, the novelist creates the illusion of real dialogue, only to reveal that this is ultimately a fallacy also. In *Zoo*, the lovers are separated and exiled. Shklovsky is first in Russia, then in Berlin. Alya is first in Europe, then Tahiti. He is lonely, filling up his days with writing. He expects a bond to still exist between them, but her replies are few and brief. It is clear from her words that she does not love him. It also becomes increasingly clear that a return is unlikely. Letter Eighteen, Shklovsky prefaces, is about "inevitability and the predictability of denouement, also about the fact that words are futile" (p. 64). This, as Claire Goldstein suggests, shows not only the failure of love but the failure of writing. Thus there is a duplicity at play. The lover writes to keep the affair alive but

ultimately has already failed in his endeavour. The love is already gone and does not return. The epistolary genre concerns itself with what Goldstein describes as the “failure of language to sustain a reliable or authoritative system of communication” (1997, p. ix).

Shklovsky also comments blithely on the futility of the love letter. The reader comes to imagine his character as a good-humoured old curmudgeon – half love-stricken and desperate, half fatalistic and bemused.

Life tailors us for a certain person and laughs when we are drawn to someone unable to love us. All this is simple – like postage stamps (p. 19).

Unrequited love underpins epistolary literature. It dictates style, tone and the narrative arc. From the outset, the reader must believe there is hope of reunion. But in reality the love affair is over once the hero (or heroine) picks up her pen. As Kauffman notes:

The story is over when Heloise writes her first letter to Abelard (1986, p. 64).

So too in *Zoo*:

Dear Alya, I haven't seen you now for two days. I call. The telephone squeals; I can tell that I've stepped on someone. I finally reach you. You're busy in the afternoon, in the evening. So I write you another letter. I love you very much (p. 13).

I don't feel like writing anymore. I have no use for letters; I have no use for a guitar...I just don't care. I know one thing; you won't even put my letter in the basket on the right side of your table (p. 52).

To counter the lack of real intimacy, the writing style in epistolary is intimate. It is colloquial, confidential, warm and devoted, concerned with sharing the small crumbs of everyday life. The lover who writes shares secrets and make confessions. At the same time he or she chastises the very vehicle of love-making, moaning about language and its inability to convey the fullness of feeling. Words on paper cannot deliver physical closeness nor can they express the sentiments the lover wishes to convey. Lovers who write are, by their nature, highly literate. They observe the nature of letters, the style of their own writing, and their lover's style or lack of thereof. The lover thus becomes what Sheldon describes as a "writer-technician" (p. xxx). Shklovsky plays with the boundaries of life and art, exhuming his book from the depths of his heart to heal himself in the process.

Yet art needs the local, the vital, the differentiated (just the word for a letter!)
Yet it's just as well that writing isn't easy – my friends always told me that. To live in any real way is painful. In that respect, you are a big help to me, Alya
(pp. 87, 89).

Shklovsky is lover, writer, reader, editor. This is what Kauffman describes as the "multiply fractured" split subject of epistolary writing (1992). As jilted lover, his task is to win Alya back. But Shklovsky cannot help being a writer first. He infuses

his letters with glib humor, making observations on the literary theories and politics of the day. Shklovsky complains of the difficulties of getting published, of working with difficult editors. He also adopts the voice of the editor, adding satirical prefaces to each letter and thus undermining his own love-pleas. There is intertextuality to Shklovsky's novel too. He crosses out one of Alya's letters with red pen, goading, tempting and seducing the reader. Of course, the reader cannot gulp it down fast enough.

Letter Nineteen: Which is not to be read? Though she used ruled stationery, this is the best letter in the whole book, but it is not to be read and has therefore been crossed out (p. 72).

Through tricks like this and his short witty prefaces, Shklovsky draws attention to the artificiality of the love letter. Letters, stories, gossip, observations of daily life, news reports and journal entries all go into the mix, belittling love and fabricating it. Times and dates become an obsession too. They are a technical device inherent to the form of the letter, but in the kind of generic disruption that Shklovsky plays with – where dates and times are not essential to the narrative structure – they work to heighten the lovers' isolation, rejection and solitude, as well as to make clear the long and enduring absence. They also keep the reader under the pretence that these letters are being written in real time.

I have your permission to telephone at 10.30. Four and a half hours, then another twenty empty hours, and between them your voice (p. 47).

The role of the fictional editor is evident in many key epistolary works – *Clarissa*,

Lolita, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The editor is there for practical purposes, to collate the fictional letters and present them to a reading audience; essentially to provide a framework to the text. But the editor also mirrors the discourses that exist with epistolary, reflecting the porous lines between fiction and non-fiction, self and other, writer and reader (Kauffman 1992, p. 171). Just as Nabokov creates the fictional editor John Ray Jr., PhD to give authority and authenticity to his novel *Lolita*, Shklovsky's prefaces alter how we understand his love for Alya. MacArthur describes the narrator as the epistolary novel's "implied author". The editor is "the mind lurking behind an epistolary novel, who cannot speak directly to the reader" (1990, p. 9).

Here, we begin to see the various subject positions and modes of address open up. The questions of "to whom, for whom and why does one write" begin to have resonance, as we see how epistolary exploits addresser/addressee as well as sender/receiver positions. Who is the letter writer and who is the reader? Does Shklovsky intend his letters for Alya alone? Or do we begin to see a broader address – his literary circle, his Formalist friends, the editor he hopes will publish his novel, the reader he hopes will enjoy it?

We begin to see too the relevance of Lacanian theory. Through the "differentiation" that is inherent in letter writing, the absent lover becomes the "Other". Alya is estranged, unavailable, unattainable. Shklovsky reinforces this Otherness through the differing characterisation of both himself and Alya. He does this through his own letters – evoking her tastes and anticipating how she will receive him – as well as by including the letters he writes to her. Also through careful and considered use

of language:

I have many words and much strength, but she to who I speak all my words is a foreigner (p. 69).

Of course, Alya signifies more than just a lover. She stands in for the extravagance and beauty of Western Europe, just as Shklovsky himself is the exiled, the alienated.

Alya is the realization of a metaphor. I invented a woman and love in order to make a book about misunderstanding, about alien people, about an alien land. I want to go back to Russia (p. 103).

The letter stands in for the absent Other. The letter is the lover's body – opened, revealed and transported in time. Shklovsky kisses Alya's letter and she kisses his in return. Throughout history, letters have been tear-stained, scented with perfume, pressed under pillows, kept and carried close to the heart, burnt in a final and impulsive end to an affair. In *Zoo*, Shklovsky's letters are his body and his blood.

O parting, o body broken, o blood spilled (p. 20).

I write you every night, then I tear up the letter and throw it in the wastebasket. The letters revive, mend and I write them again. You receive everything I've written... Only I, torn and shredded like a letter, keep climbing out of the wastebasket for your broken toys. I will survive dozens more of your

passing fancies; every day you tear me up and every night I revive, like the letters (p. 48).

In Alya's absence, Shklovsky puts his lover on trial. He rails against her withdrawal from his life and mounts his own defence as worthy lover.

What to write about! My whole life is a letter to you. I've come to understand so many simple words: yearn, perish, burn, but "yearn" (with the pronoun "I") is the most comprehensible word (p. 27).

We also see the broken promises and transgressions of epistolary writing. Shklovsky is told not to write of love. Yet he does:

Forbidden are words about flowers. Forbidden is spring. In general, all the good words are faint with exhaustion. Alya, I can't hold back the words! I love you. With rapture, with cymbals (p. 84).

At the end of every epistolary novel comes death. The death of the writer, death of relationship, death to the correspondence, and an end to the book. For a time writing defers death. But death is omnipresent. Death is "present but unfulfilled...for the act of writing is a continual deferral of death" (Kauffman 1986, p. 58).

Shklovsky writes to Alya for as long as he can. But with his last letter, he ends the (epistolary) relationship and returns to Russia. He wants rest from Russia and Alya – his joint censors – and resigns himself to self-annihilation. It is the same self-annihilation we see when Heloise takes the veil, when Humbert dies in jail awaiting

trial after finishing his manuscript *Lolita*, and when Offred is smuggled out of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

I raise my arm and surrender. Let into Russia me and all my guileless luggage... (p. 104).

In rejecting writing and the epistolary relationship, the (former) letter writer reclaims not only life but immortality. If the writing has been cathartic, there must come a time to cease. MacArthur, writing about love-letter writers generally, sums it up thus:

Through writing she becomes independent of her lover, whom she has transformed into her own textual creation and who, she discovers, has merely provided an excuse for the expression of passion. Ultimately, writing allows her to choose her own closure for the love affair rather than remain the passive object... When she stops writing she closes the relationship on her own terms. Instead of actually dying, she "dies" textually with the end of her work; since letters can be read by a wider audience, and even reread from generation to generation, she brings herself immortality (1990, p. 94).

3. To whom the letter belongs: Lacan and the epistolary tradition

3.1 Lacan, the Freudian

To understand Lacan, we need first to understand Freud. The Oedipus complex was central to Freud's thinking and later subject to a reworking by Lacan. It is also one of the central motifs identifiable in contemporary epistolary literature (Kauffman 1992). The Oedipus complex, then, must be our theoretical starting point.

For Freud, the Oedipus complex was significant because it heralded the repression of pleasure-seeking behaviour and an acceptance of the reality principal. In the developing child, pleasure-seeking comes from sucking at the breast (in the oral stage), from defecating (in the anal stage) and, as the sexualised child develops, with the discovery of the genitals and sexual difference in the phallic stage. Freud's Oedipus finds its place in the phallic stage. According to Freud, the father threatens the boy child with castration, causing him to turn away from the pleasure of the mother's body and repress his incestuous desire. For girls, the Freudian Oedipus is problematic, starting as it does from the premise that girls are already castrated and thus inferior (Eagleton 1996, p. 155). It is this inherent sexism that mars Freud's work and has seen it largely discredited by modern psychology. Yet his broader thinking remains deeply pervasive in the arts and in cultural criticism.

The mapping of the human unconscious is Freud's most crucial contribution to science and the arts. In an era when psychoanalytic terms have pervaded our everyday language, it seems normal to take the unconscious for granted. But at the beginning of the 20th century, as Vice notes, Freud's ideas were nothing short of

“revolutionary” (Vice 1996, p. 2).

For Freud, the conscious mind is repressed and contained. It is dominated by a ‘super-ego’ that allows us to exist in the social order. The preconscious exists just beneath, while the unconscious is buried deep below – repressed, censored and for the most part denied a voice. Within these layers, are the id and the ego. The id is dominated by the sex and death drives. It is deeply anti-social and demands immediate satisfaction. The ego is motivated by desire – the satisfaction of appropriate desires for pleasure and the repression of inappropriate ones that will cause pain. The super-ego represses and postpones these various desires, enabling us to go about our lives in a socially appropriate manner. Those that manifest are based on disguise – in tricks of language defined as metaphor and metonymy (Fuery & Mansfield 2000). These terms will be defined below.

Freud was not the first to discover the unconscious. But he was the first to discover that it *speaks*: in slips of the tongue, in dreams, jokes and symbolic language (Felman 1987, p. 123). In this *speaking* Lacan found his fascination. For Lacan, Freud’s essential insight was not that the unconscious exists. Rather, it was that the unconscious has *structure* (Bowie 1987). To this existing structure, Lacan brought his own understanding of language, inspired by the work of structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. His observation that the unconscious is structured like language remains among his most famous pronouncements (Lacan 2002, p. 222). Thus the linguistic structure of the human unconscious affects what we say and how we say it. In psychoanalysis, and indeed in literature, our own language betrays the human psyche and the repressed desires of the human mind.

Those who argue psychoanalytic theory has continued relevance in contemporary culture mount a fervent defence. Shoshana Felman describes the “cultural fecundity of psychoanalysis, the general significance of psychoanalysis for contemporary culture” (1987, p. 8). Mark Bracher argues strongly that psychoanalytic theory offers “the sort of account of subjectivity” that arts criticism needs.

It offers a comprehensive model of the human subject that includes...the fullest account available of the various roles that language and discourse play in the psychic economy and thereby in human affairs in general (1993, p. 12).

British literary critic Terry Eagleton with characteristic wit observes that psychoanalysis has made it into common parlance.

This highly arcane theory, astonishingly, is the common dialect of the street. Terms like ‘ego’, ‘Oedipus complex’, ‘libido’, ‘paranoia’ and ‘unconscious’ have become part of everyday language in a way that ‘ideology’, ‘commodity fetishism’ or ‘mode of production’ have not (1996, p. 79).

Tony Thwaites argues psychoanalysis has provided an ideological framework for academic thinking on issues as diverse as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and ethnic cleansing. It has also informed the work of influential and inventive thinkers Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Joan Copjec, Renate Salecl, Alenka Zupancic, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.

[P]sychoanalysis...offers ways of thinking not just of the individual, but of those dimensions...[that] spill over those boundaries into questions of the social, and the cultural and the ideological (Thwaites 2007, p. 3).

In other words, it offers a model for understanding the human psyche and the world in which we live. Crucially, these are the twin concerns of literature. Pettigrew notes the synchronicity between the two:

[A]n analysis of a creative work would reveal certain fundamental poetic truths about the unconscious of humanity. These fundamental poetic truths provide a unique access to the unconscious: another royal road, as it were (Pettigrew & Raffoul 1996, pp. 198-199).

Lacan's rereading of Freud breathed new life into psychoanalysis. A trained psychiatrist, Lacan was first and foremost a practising psychoanalyst. Yet his thinking was as much influenced by Freud as it was by the French elite of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. A highly divisive figure in French psychology, Lacan founded his own school of psychoanalysis after he was excluded from both the French and international professional bodies. The cause for the split was his controversial "short sessions" – psychoanalytic consultations that were less than the standard hour.

In 1953, Lacan began to give regular seminars that would continue until 1980, the year before his death. Originally training seminars for psychoanalysts, Lacan's philosophical approach made him a *cause célèbre* among the writers and intellectuals who came to hear him speak. The publication of Lacan's seminars has proved difficult. Some seminars were transcribed and later translated, most notably

the 1966 *Ecrits* and the 1977 *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. But many have neither been published in the original French nor translated into English, making it extremely difficult to distill Lacan into key themes or even a clear school of thought. Compounding this is the fact that many scholars prefer their own translations, making work in this field duplicitous and fraught, especially for anyone without good French. Despite this, Lacan's influence has spread. In the 70s, 80s and into the 90s, he inspired film scholars and literary critics alike.

Shoshana Felman was a literature student in Paris in the 1970s when she bought a copy of Lacan's *Ecrits*. She recalls making the purchase against the advice of the bookseller. But what she discovered in Lacan was a tool for "enhanced literary understanding" (Felman 1987, p. 5). His theoretical framework enabled her to read literature better, which in turn enabled her to read Lacan better. Through a concurrent reading of Lacan and other literature, each illuminated the other. In her influential book *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, Felman attributes to Lacan a theory of reading that "opens up into a rereading of the world as well as into a rereading of psychoanalysis itself" (Felman 1987, p. 9). Moreover, it makes us more aware, more attentive to the messages and signs in literature that were once "unreadable, inaudible, invisible" (p. 15). This is Lacan's great legacy, to have found in Freud a way of reading that:

...keeps an entire system of signification open, rather than foreclose it, so that the small, unnoticeable messages can grow, by virtue of the fact that the big ones are kept still, open and suspended (Felman 1987, p. 15).

What Felman argues is that Lacan teaches us how to ask the most basic of human questions. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to think? And consequently, what does it mean to be contemporary? (1987, p. 15). These are questions that reverberate in literature as well as life.

Felman is not alone in championing Lacan. Both Bracher and Eagleton also consider Lacan's work on desire crucial to a better understanding of humanity. Bracher believes understanding desire is fundamental to creating social change:

It is thus desire rather than knowledge that must become the focal point of cultural criticism if we are to understand how cultural phenomena move people (1993, p. 19).

Eagleton argues an understanding of desire could provide a key to understanding human happiness:

[W]e need to know how much repression and deferred fulfillment a society is likely to tolerate; how it is that desire can be switched from ends that we would value to ends which trivialize and degrade it; how it comes about that men and women are sometimes prepared to suffer oppression and indignity, and at what points such submission is likely to fail. We can learn from psychoanalytical theory more about why most people prefer John Keats to Leigh Hunt; we can also learn more about the nature of a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into

revolt...[and] neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence
(1996, p. 193).

3.2 Lacan, the linguist

Lacan brought to psychoanalysis a love of language. He saw not only that the unconscious was structured by language, but that language was the supreme tool for revealing the human psyche. This emphasis on language distinguishes Lacan from Freud. Whereas Freud found in the Oedipus story a theory of *repression* of unconscious desire, Lacan is concerned with the *expression* of unconscious desire through language and speech. As Felman writes:

[W]hat Freud discovered in Oedipus – the unconscious nature of desire – implies, in Lacan’s view, a structural relation between language and desire: a desire that articulates itself...in a symbolic metonymic language (1987, p. 128).

Thus, on the psychoanalytic couch, the subject’s own language betrays him. In literature, it is words on the page.

Lacan’s interest in language and his theory of the gaze brought him to the attention of film and literature critics. He was conscious in his seminars to avoid art criticism – “Of course that is the danger and I shall try to avoid any such confusion” (Lacan 1987, p. 109). But like Freud before him, he ‘psychoanalysed’ literature and drew on it to illustrate his concepts and thinking. Indeed both penned fascinating – if

fascinatingly divergent – essays on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*²¹. Lacan’s own writing has a literary quality, revealing his enchantment with word play and allegory.

Many remark on the difficulty of his work. Eagleton refers to Lacan’s “sibylline style”. Bowie suspects Lacan of being deliberately opaque – creating prose that is an “elaborate mechanism for multiplying and highlighting the connections between signifiers” (Bowie 1987, p. 125). Lacan himself admits as much. He likes to “leave the reader no other way than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult” (Lacan 2002, p. 138). However many academics are far more sibylline than Lacan ever was, twisting themselves into ever tighter knots in an attempt to explain and progress Lacanian thinking. If this thesis draws heavily on a few key scholars, it is not for lack of wide reading. It is because the vast majority of academics make reading Lacan look easy.

Language for Lacan was a matter of good timing. Freud was not disinterested in language but his work predated the structural linguistics developed by Saussure and advanced by Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Althusser and Roman Jakobson. Lacan brought a theory of language to Freud that allowed him to carry out a series of what Bowie describes as “two-way mappings” – of the unconscious on language and language on the unconscious (Bowie 1987, p. 108).

²¹ Rivkin and Ryan note that the tradition of psychoanalytic literary criticism begins with Freud, whose 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, offers a reading of a horror story by the German writer ETA Hoffman (Rivkin & Ryan 1998) .

Despite the enormity of Lacan's teaching – which morphed, changed tack, digressed and diverged – three key concepts are relevant for our purposes. Namely Lacan's rewriting of Freud's Oedipus, the influence of language on the human psyche, and the concept of the gaze as it has informed film and literature criticism.

3.3 Lacan and the faux phallus: key concepts

Lacan distills Freud's Oedipus into what he calls the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. Lacan's approach is a symbolic one – non-gendered and unconcerned about the presence or absence of a penis. Indeed, the phallus is *never* the penis in Lacan. Rather it is purely symbolic – a figurative object of the mother's desire, and later, ours. Castration, too, is merely symbolic. It is the symbolic loss of an imaginary object – the breast, the bottle, the thing we desire most. Father steps in as the symbolic law to banish the child from the fullness of the Mother's breast. In this moment, the human subject is born – a split subject torn between pleasure and desire, repression and fulfillment, conscious and dark unconscious.

In the Symbolic, the child moves from an all-consuming relationship with its mother to become a separate member of the family. We must enter the Symbolic to acquire language, thus postponing satisfaction and repressing desire.

In the Imaginary, the child is egocentric and self-absorbed. Everything is an image of the child's own self, and he sees himself as a complete entity. He is unaware of social constructs and unable to see himself as distinct from the body of the mother.

The Real is more conceptually difficult. At its simplest, the Real is where we find the drives and our repressed desires. It is the thing that is left over, the thing that moves us deeply, the thing that is beyond our reckoning, knowledge and control.

The Symbolic precedes the Imaginary in most discussions, though it may be helpful to consider the latter preceding the former. Or even better, the two as overlapping. In the Imaginary, we find self-reflection, crystallised in the moment a child first sees himself in a mirror. Everything the child sees, even the mother, is an image-reflection of the child's own perfectly formed self. Or as Felman explains:

[A] symmetry that subsumes all difference within a delusion of a unified and homogenous individual identity (1987, p. 61).

In the Symbolic, we find exclusion, absence and lack. The child is banished and must accept himself as separate. He is part of an existing social order, subject to the law of the Father. Thus he comes into being through a combination of the Father's exercise of power and the symbolic loss of the Mother. Here, the child begins to substitute other objects for the object of primordial desire (breast or bottle).

For Lacan, this loss is necessary to enter into language. Eagleton explains this by reference to Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians. Because of the abolition of words, the Lilliputians must carry around in sacks the objects they wish to converse about. Thus language is empty and comes from lack – an endless process of difference and absence.

[I]nstead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite... the 'metaphorical' world of the signifier has yielded ground to the 'metonymic' world of language (Eagleton 1996, p. 167).

Or as Felman writes:

[T]he combination of desire and a Law prohibiting desire is regulated, through a linguistic structure of exchange, into a repetitive process of replacement – of substitution – of symbolic objects (substitutes) of desire (1987, p. 104).

In the Symbolic, then, the subject finds himself in the realm of linguistic symbols. In other words, in the realm of the signifier. Lacan believed the unconscious is structured like language (Lacan 2002, p. 222). He believed, as Eagleton puts it, that language is 'what hollows being into desire' (1996, p. 167). After language, the child has no more access to the Mother's body. Thus we must use substitute objects (what Lacan calls *objet petite a*) to plug the hole at the centre of our being.

To enter language is to be severed from the Real. Eagleton describes the Real as "that inaccessible realm which is always beyond reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order" (1996, p. 168). Our unconscious, coded and repressed, comprises signifiers rather than signifieds – complex chains of signs beneath which are hidden meanings. Lacan sums it up thus:

Just as what is rejected from the symbolic register reappears in the real, in the same way the hole in the real that results from loss, sets the signifier in motion. This hole provides the place for the projection of the missing signifier, which is essential to the structure of the Other (Lacan in Felman 1982, p. 38).

A brief discussion of semiotics is necessary here. Saussure viewed all language as a system of signs. Each sign is made up of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the word – marks on a page or sounds in the air. The signified is the concept the sign invokes – a soft furry animal for the word *cat*. In metaphor, there is similarity between the meaning of a signifier and its substitute – the word ‘flame’ to stand in for love or lover. In metonymy there is a displacement of meaning – ‘Hollywood’ as shorthand for ‘US cinema’ or ‘Canberra’ for the Australian Government.

Lacan applied concepts of metaphor and metonym to the unconscious, showing how the ‘signified’ slips beneath the ‘signifier’ such that meaning is hidden and coded. What Lacan looks for, in other words, are hidden meanings. In literature, we do the same – seeking signs and codes that reveal hidden meanings in the text. For Saussure, signified and signifier were a united concept. Lacan challenges this, placing signifier (S) on top of the signified (s):

S
—
s

As such, the equation suggests the signifier – language or words – is supreme and revealing.

For the signified does indeed, in Lacan's account 'slip beneath' the signifier and successfully resist our attempts to locate and delimit it (Bowie 1987, p. 110).

The signifier is key when it comes to psychoanalytic literary theory. As the unconscious is made up of signifiers, so too the literary text is made up of signifiers. The Lacanian critic works with the literary text in the same way the psychoanalyst plies the dream text:

By attending to what may seem like evasions, ambivalences and points of intensity in the narrative – words which do not get spoken, words which are spoken with unusual frequency, doublings and slidings of language (Eagleton 1996, p. 155).

Or as Rivkin and Ryan note:

[L]iterary texts are like dreams; they embody or express unconscious material in the form of complex displacements and condensations...literature displaces unconscious desires, drives, and motives into imagery (1998, p. 125).

Thus, psychoanalytic criticism allows us to see the subtext in literature. To see what is concealed, to see the unconscious of the work itself, to see how the words work to reveal themes and motifs and ideas (Eagleton 1996).

In his seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan argues that the “itinerary of the signifier” determines the actions of the characters (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 29). In the same way, the signifier determines the workings of the unconscious mind. But what, asks Lacan, “remains of a signifier when it has no more signification?” It remains the symbol – and master signifier – of the subject’s “shattered childhood” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, pp. 51, 52).

3.4 Lacan and the gaze

Slavoj Žižek has made it his life’s work to “mercilessly exploit popular culture” to explain Lacan (Žižek 1992b, p. vii). Indeed he is a voracious consumer of high and low culture and his writings draw on texts as diverse as Alfred Hitchcock and Colleen McCullough. One gets the impression that he spends a lot of time in front of the television. As he recently told *The Guardian*: “A lot of what I write is blah, blah, bullshit, a diversion from the 700-page book on Hegel I should be writing” (Jeffries 2011).

Žižek approaches Lacan’s oeuvre as an archeologist might an ancient tomb. But instead of brushes, Žižek uses film and literature – drawing out meaning, revealing the finer points, highlighting the enduring brilliance of Lacan’s thinking.

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek uses Hollywood to outline Lacan’s concept of the gaze. He explains our fascination with nostalgia films and *film noir* saying that it is the gaze

of the ‘Other’ that keeps us watching. We are fascinated by the gaze of the mythic ‘naïve’ spectator, the one who was ‘still able to take it seriously’, the one who still ‘believes in it’, in place of us (Zizek 1992b, p. 112).

The concept of the gaze is key in Lacanian thinking. As Fuery and Mansfield point out, Lacanian gaze theory has had “one of the most powerful impacts” on contemporary art production (2000, p. 163). Lacan’s gaze is a desiring gaze, born from the loss experienced in the Symbolic realm. In the seeing or scopic realm, the object of desire is the gaze. As Lacan says: *The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze* (Lacan 1987, p. 105). In Lacan’s algebraic style, the *objet petite a* stands in for ‘*autre*’, or the ‘Other’. The Other is what we desire. It is the Mother, the breast, the bottle – or all the things we desire in replace of them. In Lacan’s rereading of Freud, he adds the scopic drive (the compulsion to look) to the sex drive and the death drive. The drive of the look is to see the object of desire (as in voyeurism) but also to make oneself out as the object of the Other’s desiring gaze (as in exhibitionism) (Levine 2008, p. 70).

The gaze, Lacan says, is the object-cause of our desire. It is the source or trigger of our desire in the scopic or visual field (McGowan 2007, p. 6). It results from the traumatic lack or loss in the Symbolic, and it is through this loss that we begin the process of desiring. As psychoanalytic subjects, we repeat this loss over and over again. The concept of *Widerholungszwang*, or the compulsion to repeat, is what Lacan attempts to explain in his seminar on The Purloined Letter.

Lacan compares the gaze to the turning inside-out of the finger of a winter glove – the way the leather envelops the fur, itself unseen until the leather disappears.

*[T]hat consciousness in its illusion of something seeing itself seeing itself,
finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze* (Lacan 1987, p. 82).

In other words, the gaze is hidden in the very illusion of “seeing oneself see oneself”. It is the underside of consciousness, a privileged structure, not seen but “imagined by me in the field of the Other” (Lacan 1987, pp. 83, 84).

Though Lacan has been vastly influential in film studies, early film theory confused his concept of the gaze²². The Lacanian gaze is an *objective* gaze, not a *subjective* gaze. The gaze does not come from the look of the audience member, sitting in the theatre watching the film. Rather, it comes from within the film itself (McGowan 2007). As Lacan suggests in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, human subjects see only from one point but we are looked at from all sides (Lacan 1987, p. 72). Importantly, for our purposes, the gaze is the point at which we are already included in the picture. The gaze works to trigger our desire visually. Thus it is the *objet petite a*. It is not a positive thing, rather it is a lack, a hole, a *lacunae* – that thing that draws us in and sutures us into the scene we are viewing. It distorts and undermines our ‘all-seeing’, ‘all-knowing’ perception, compelling our look as

²² In her influential 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, feminist scholar Laura Mulvey identified the gaze as male and subjective, aligning the eye of the camera lens with that of the male viewer, such that the male and female characters on the screen were objectified (*Screen*, Autumn 16.3, pp.6-18). McGowan points out this was a misreading of Lacan’s gaze theory and ultimately led to Lacan being discredited in cinema philosophy. The correct reading is in fact the opposite. The Lacanian gaze is “something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze” (McGowan 2007, pp. 4-5). This position is supported by Žižek’s extensive work.

spectators by promising to reveal the secret of the Other (McGowan 2007). Thus it is also the point at which the gaze of the voyeur is already anticipated. As Miran Bozovic explains:

He is searching for himself, for his own gaze in the picture; he is fascinated by his own presence, by his own gaze in it. That which attracts his attention in the picture is the blot that disrupts its consistency – and he is present in the picture precisely as the blot: ‘if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen which I earlier called the stain, the spot, says Lacan (Zizek 1992a, p. 175).

Thus the object-gaze is “the blot” in the picture. It is the thing that blurs the easy transparency of the viewed image. Lacan famously takes German painter Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors* as a case in point (Lacan 1987). The painting is a portrait of two ambassadors shown with still life, with an oblique and twisting skull in the foreground. The skull is given great prominence in the picture, but we do not see it instantly. In fact we see it once we have almost left the painting and are staring back at it. *Looking awry*, as Zizek suggests. It is the skull that stares back at us from the picture, altering the painting’s theme to one of death, destruction and decay. As Zizek surmises: “I can never see properly...the point in the Other from which it gazes back at me” (Zizek 1992b, p. 114). Likewise we find the same concept in film and literature.

Zizek explains the stain in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* is the smouldering cigarette in the darkened window opposite Jeff’s apartment. Jeff (James Stewart) can’t see

properly who or what is staring back at him, but he knows for certain that he is being watched (Zizek 1992b). It is at the point of being seen that Jeff finds he too is seen. He is already part of the picture, no longer spectator but part of the spectacle. As Bozovic notes, *Rear Window* is a metaphor for Lacan's critique of voyeurism, for Jeff, as well as for us the spectators: "You want to see? Well take a look – take a look at your own gaze!" (Zizek 1992a, p. 175).

Lacan explains the same idea in his story of the sardine can. As a student, Lacan accompanied a fisherman on a fishing trip. A sardine can bobbed in the water, glinting in the sun. The fisherman asked Lacan: "You see the can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!" (Lacan 1987, p. 95). Lacan surmises the can was looking at him because the young intellectual was the stain in the picture, the thing that was out of place. This logic explains the illusion that we are 'seeing ourselves seeing'. The spectator sees his or her own gaze mirrored in the gaze of the Other. What we stare at, in fascination, is the gaze of the Other – a gaze that is already in fact staring back at us. It is the presence of a stain that subjectifies the picture, so that we know that the picture is in effect staring back at us. As voyeur, Lacan is forced to look at his own gaze – thus encountering the traumatic impact of the object-gaze, the unseeing gaze of the Other.

Importantly, the gaze introduces a split between the viewer and the picture. Or, as Lacan would have it, between the eye and the gaze. This prevents us from achieving proper self-identity, from understanding ourselves and our problems. Zizek's remarkable analysis of Hitchcock's *The Birds* explains this concept further. If it were not for the birds – the blot in the picture, the "lawless

impossible Real” – the movie would be a classic American drama, one which we could quickly understand, come to terms with and solve. Hitchcock does not intend that it should be that easy. The birds do not ‘symbolise’ problems in the family. Rather, the birds overshadow the family drama completely, such that the drama loses its significance. We do not see the story of the jealous mother, her son and her son’s lover. Rather we are caught up in the story of a menacing plague of birds. While our vision is distorted, we cannot see properly. And when the film ends, the birds are no longer there. The last shot is the car driving away, surrounded by calm birds. Because we do not see, we do not see the cracks that have emerged in our subjective selves – a certain lack, a certain failure, something that “has not worked out” (Žižek 1992b, p. 104). For Hitchcock, the birds represent the very failing of our unclear vision. Like the birds, the *objet petite a* is the thing we desire and the object of our pattern of repetition. It stops us from seeing things as they really are.

In nostalgia films, the nostalgic object blinds us to the fact that the Other is already gazing at us. If the object-gaze has a traumatic force, then in nostalgia the gaze of the Other is “domesticated, gentrified”.

Instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of ‘seeing ourselves seeing’, of seeing the gaze itself. In a way, we could say that the function of fascination is precisely to blind us to the fact that the other is already gazing at us (Žižek 1992b, p. 114).

Once we realise that the Other gazes back at us, the fascination is dispelled. The whole spectacle is staged only to capture our desire. Fantasy scenarios construct our desire. Or as Žižek notes:

It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: through fantasy, we learn how to desire (Žižek 1992b, p. 6).

In encountering the traumatic gaze, the subject encounters the Real – thus breaking free of the Symbolic structure which enforces social rules and laws. As McGowan explains:

The hold that symbolic authority has over subjects depends on the avoidance of the traumatic real that exposes the imposture of all authority. Though the encounter with the gaze traumatises the subject, it also provides the basis for the subject's freedom - freedom from the constraints of the big Other (2007, p. 16).

By following this argument, we can see that film and literature's fascination with fantasy reflects a dependence on the status quo. The happy ending, as it were. The gaze, which we encounter as voyeurs or spectators, is disturbing. It is similar to the psychoanalyst's well-timed interjection in psychoanalysis. Similarly, disruptive literary genres disturb our own ideologies.

We are reminded here of the transgressive nature of traditional epistolary writing. Also the “disruption and defamiliarisation” that Kauffman identifies in her

contemporary examples (Kauffman 1992). Epistolary sets out to question, to mock, to present different ways of seeing. In epistolary, we find a vehicle that disrupts the dominant ideologies, that disturbs the status quo. In identifying the gaze in epistolary literature, we can also identify the blot in the picture. Through an encounter with the gaze, the voyeur is traumatised. At the same time, he is freed from the constraints of the big Other, of dominant society, of uncontested ideology. Just like Barthes' texts of *jouissance*, psychoanalytic literary theory offers a new way of seeing to those who would dare to use it.

3.5 The epistolary Lacan

Epistolary fiction is primed for Lacanian criticism. The gaze structure is inherent in reading letters. Of course a letter might simply be read by two people – the writer and the intended addressee. But the story gets interesting once the letter is intercepted. Thus in epistolary fiction we will always find the blot – the point at which the reader is sutured in, where our voyeuristic gaze is anticipated by the narrator.

Imagine a woman writes to a man. That man is not her husband. The husband, the Other, must not know – just like the King in *The Purloined Letter*. The inevitability of the discovery is the betrayal that epistolary relies on. And it is the triadic scenario anticipated by the epistolary narrative – namely the gaze between two lovers and an innocent third looking on – that evokes the thirdness of the Lacanian gaze. Social order comes unstuck the moment the Other can no longer ignore the goings-on around him (Žižek 1992b, p. 73).

As epistolary readers, we are sutured in. We are voyeurs who, like James Stewart's character in *Rear Window*, are never merely spectators. Žizek does not deal with epistolary literature but his discussion of the gaze in film can be extended to the use of letters in fiction. You want to see, epistolary fiction asks of us. Well take a look – take a look at your own gaze! (Žizek 1992a, p. 176).

As readers of epistolary we are framed as voyeurs or spectators. The letters we read are intended for someone else's eyes only. This opens up an illicit pleasure – like watching someone undress before a window. Thus our unconscious desires are stirred. In particular, the desire to look – Lacan's scopic drive. Bozovic describes Hitchcock's cinema as exploiting "the lust of the eye" (Žizek 1992a, p. 161). The same is true of epistolary literature. We read because we are motivated by the scopic drive. Or as Lacan puts it, "the appetite of the eye". It is the appetite of the eye "that must be fed" that produces the "hypnotic value" of art (Lacan 1987, p. 115).

Lacan's reference is to painting. But just as we find in painting the spot or stain that compels our eye – the point at which the painting gazes back at us and includes us in the picture – we find this too in epistolary literature. As readers, the spectacle unfolds on the stage before us. But manifest within the epistolary genre is an eye that gazes back at us, that turns us into the prey of our own gaze. As spectators in an art form which makes use of the gaze, we are like an entomologist, Bozovic explains "who becomes prey of his own gaze when one of his specimens returns the gaze from its eyespots" (Žizek 1992a, p. 170). In contemporary epistolary literature, we find ourselves in the picture, as part of the scene we are viewing. At the very

point that our eyes meet the gaze of the Other, we are no longer spectators but contributing players. In the cinema, we must confront and confess our desire to look (Zizek 1992b, p. 91). In epistolary we do the same. We are forced to ask: what do we really want from all this looking, all this seeing?

Thus in epistolary, we are doubly seduced. First, the genre exploits our compulsion to look, framing the narrative so that we are watching a scene – or, more to the point, reading a letter – that is intended for someone else’s eyes only. Second, it conceals the blot that gazes back at us. The blot is cleverly concealed in the narrative structure – like in Holbein’s painting – by a fictional correspondent who promises us complete access. Only in the end is the narrator revealed as unreliable. Real truth is finally revealed, uncomfortably and traumatically, pinning us to the picture, asking us whether this is what we really want to see.

In epistolary, the blot enables suspense. Just like Holbein’s skull, it is hidden and buried, such that we see it only as we are about to leave the picture, *looking awry*. Like the portraiture in *The Ambassadors*, and the birds in Hitchcock’s film, the main story functions as a distraction. But it is also a key to the central motif of the text. Zizek explains this by reference to *Rear Window*: the fantastic goings-on outside Jeff’s window make us overlook what is going on inside his own apartment, namely the dysfunctional romance between him and Grace Kelly. Just like his murderous neighbour, Jeff also wants to rid himself of Grace Kelly (Zizek 1992b, p. 92). The neighbour’s smouldering cigarette is the blot in the picture and the neighbour’s murderous intent is the object of Jeff’s desire. We do not realise this until we see the neighbour looking back at Jeff, and looking back at us. Thus we

lose the spectator's privileged position and become a player in the action. At this point, the text becomes a text of *jouissance*, as we are forced to ask ourselves difficult questions. What is it in this picture that compels us to look? What is it that we are trying to see? And do we really want to see it anyway?

Like dreams, letters provide a royal road to the unconscious – revealing truth through language, slips of the tongue and the repetition of words. Recall Nabokov's use of language:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three on the teeth. Lo Lee Ta (1955, p. 7).

In this passage, at the beginning of the book, we learn more about Humbert Humbert than we care to know. But we are blinded by the fantasy that Humbert creates to dazzle us – namely that he loves Lolita. Not until the end of the novel do we discover what he really is – an incestuous pervert obsessed with his step-daughter's body who will seduce her to satisfy his own immoral cravings.

Use of language is a crucial motif across the epistolary genre. This places us firmly in the realm of the Symbolic – the place where language is acquired and the desiring subject is created. Just as in Lacan's Symbolic we find exclusion, absence and lack, we find those things in the epistolary genre too.

Just as the love affair is over once the correspondent takes up her pen, so too the subject is cast out of the nurturing narcissistic relationship with the Mother, into the language and lack of the Symbolic. Like the Lacanian subject, the lover is left with nothing but words and desires – an endless linguistic chain that in Eagleton’s words hollows being into desire (1996, p. 167). We move from wholeness and having to lack, loss and language in epistolary fiction. The letter comes to stand in for the lover – it is the *objet petite a*, the thing we desire, the body of the lost lover. Like the *objet petite a*, the letter is impossible to pin down. It does not exist before our lover disappears. It is our vehicle when we fall into lack and desire. But the moment we achieve our desire – that is the lover’s true body or a release from the pain of the affair – the letter disappears. Just like Freud’s grandson’s game of *fort/da!* we find in letter writing the anguish of loss. At the same time we experience the exhilaration of desire – desire stimulated by what we cannot possess. Like the *fort/da!* game – the “shortest narrative in the world” as Eagleton suggests – there is narrative satisfaction in letter writing (1996, p. 185).

We write because we believe the lover will return. As readers, we are compelled by the hope of a happy resolution. *Fort!* as Eagleton suggests, only has meaning only in relation to *da!* The same cycle of loss and promised return grips us in epistolary. Like the endless search for the object of our desire, we believe something lost will ultimately be found again.

3.6 The Lacanian gaze in epistolary literature

The epistolary novel sets up the gaze such that we look through the keyhole and see the eyes of the Other staring back at us.

According to Žižek's account of nostalgia films, we can choose at times to escape into fantasy. Contemporary epistolary fiction offers fantasy then takes it away. Epistolary is a transgressive genre, a text of *jouissance*. We peep through the keyhole, believing ourselves unseen. But we are not unseen, and we do not come away unchallenged. The true horror of the gaze is that we are caught. Our gaze is anticipated by the epistolary form, which sets up a scene under the pretence that it is *for our eyes only*. But in fact what we watch is for someone else's eyes only, and ultimately we will be made to pay the price for watching. What we watch is a scene that is inherently private – an incident between two lovers, an exchange “behind closed doors”. The letter emphasises the private nature of this scene, setting up a framing device unique in literature. But the trick of contemporary epistolary is that someone or something is always watching us beyond the keyhole. Beyond the characters, beyond the scene, we see the Other gazing back at us. Once we have seen the gaze, the story is over. The fantasy that has kept us enthralled has lost its pull. As Žižek notes, with reference to nostalgia film:

The function of fascination is precisely to blind us to the fact that the other is already gazing at us. If the power of fascination is to produce its effect, this fact must remain concealed. As soon as the subject becomes aware that the other gazes at him...the fascination is dispelled (Žižek 1992b, p. 114).

In contemporary epistolary, the reader is complicit. We are complicit when we read *Clarissa* – watching and wanting to see the rape scene played out. We are complicit when we read *Lolita* – beguiled and enthralled by Humbert as he recounts his seduction of the young girl. And we are complicit as we watch Bellow's *Herzog* unravel – egging him on in his Hamlet-esque madness, consuming with pleasure the perversity of his letter-ramblings. It is this that makes contemporary epistolary so compelling.

In texts of pleasure, readers are innocents. We come away with our world view unchallenged, intact. Yet in texts of *jouissance* – and in the world of epistolary – we see the world in a different light. We are forced to confront our own devious unconscious desires. Deep in all of us is a dark repressed unconscious with murderous desires whose sexual desires are unspeakable and whose compulsion to watch scandalous. When we read *Herzog*, we realise we too are only a few steps from the madhouse. Here we allude to Lacan's allegory about the Chinese philosopher Choang-tsu, who dreams he is a butterfly but wakes up asking himself whether he is not, in fact, a butterfly dreaming that he is Choang-tsu. Žižek explains Lacan's tale with reference to Fritz Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1992b, p. 16) The film is about a university professor who falls in love and murders his lover's partner, only to wake up and discover it was all a dream. The point is that we are all murderers in our subconscious. As Lacan suggests to Choang-tsu:

Indeed, he is right, and doubly so, first because it proves he is not mad, he does not regard himself as absolutely identical with Choang-tsu and secondly, because he does not fully understand how right he is. In fact, it is only when

he was the butterfly that he apprehended one of the roots of his identity – that he was, and is, in his essence, that butterfly who paints himself with his own colours – and it is because of this that, in the last resort, he is Choang-tsu (Lacan 1987, p. 76).

Our own dark unconscious pulses with unspeakable desires. In epistolary, we are forced to meet “the Real” of our desires. Like a patient on the psychoanalyst’s couch, letter writers share their own unconscious desires – through metaphor and metonymy, committing to paper the secret thoughts that could never be spoken aloud. We share the correspondent’s desires and enter the text through them. But we are not spectators. We are voyeurs and thus we are complicit, which means ultimately we too must acknowledge our unconscious desires.

In epistolary literature, we pay the price for our voyeurism. The knowing gaze that meets our own tells us there is no scapegoat, no conveniently placed culprit. In his analysis of detective novels, Žižek notes that we feel immense pleasure once the criminal is apprehended. That is the appeal of the murder mystery. Detective novels indulge our own illicit desires, while always holding someone else to account. The detective finds the real murderer and acquits us of our guilt. Thus:

Our desire is realized and we do not even have to pay the price for it (Žižek 1992b, p. 59).

The same is true in epistolary. The epistolary novel forces us to take account of our own desires. It beckons us to look through the keyhole, seduces us, then reveals to

us the blot in the picture. That blot is the traumatic gaze of the Other, which forces us to confront the real of our own desires.

As well as the desires, we confront the drives. Žižek explains that a drive is separate from a desire. It continues until the very end, in a way that cannot be controlled, understood or explained. It is Kevin's psychopathic lust to kill his classmates in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. It is Briony's unquestioning pursuit of Robbie's conviction in *Atonement*. It is Damon's pursuit of danger and death in *In A Strange Room*. In epistolary literature, the death drive plays out again and again, arising as surely as the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting. Characters exist in the space between two deaths – between the symbolic death and their actual death – a concept explored by Lacan in his analysis of *Antigone* (Lacan 1992). We can also see this in the epistolary tradition. For example in the *Portuguese Letters*, we see the nun writing in the absence of her lover, writing in the time and space between her rejection and her own self-annihilation. She dies her first death when her lover abandons her. She dies a second death when she sets down her pen for the last time. Epistolary narrators are like the living dead who return to settle the score – Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* whose transcribed tapes are examined 200 years after she is exploited as a sex slave, Leo Colston in *The Go-Between* who as an old man writes to redress the punitive British class structure of his youth and the way he was exploited by the lovers Ted and Marian. Other correspondents write to keep the dead alive – Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Briony in *Atonement*. It is because these characters are not properly buried that they return to haunt the living again and again.

The dead are the blot in epistolary. As unreliable narrators, both Briony and Eva want us to believe the people they are writing about are alive and well. So too Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. It is only at the end of the novel that we discover Lolita has died giving birth to her child. Thus she arises, the undead, her awful traumatic gaze looking back at us through the keyhole, asking us the confronting question: why did you keep watching? Why didn't you do something? This is the skull in Holbein's painting. As Žižek explains, with reference to both *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, a reader is ultimately forced to confront what the unreliable narrator cannot:

Isolate the 'blot', act as though it were not serious, keep cool – Dad's dead, okay, it's cool, no cause for excitement (Žižek 1992b, p. 27).

As readers, we do not actually see the corpse, until it rises up, dead, staring at us, in the final denouement. It is the very corpse that we ourselves have watched being murdered. Thus, it is the eye of the undead that holds us in their gaze.

4. Case study analysis: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan (2001)

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* exhibits all the qualities of the epistolary mode. Though the narrative is not written in letter format, we find all the same themes – loneliness, exile, lament for lost love, a rallying call against the existing social structure. The correspondent Briony writes in the absence of the beloved and stages revolt against the events of the past. Like other contemporary epistolary literature, Briony and other central characters are all on trial. Most importantly, the novel is constructed as a letter. Though it is written in third person from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, the novel has a specific addresser and a specific addressee. Thus the same key questions that guide any discussion of epistolary can be asked of *Atonement*: to whom, for whom and why does Briony write?

The absent lover in *Atonement* is not Briony's beloved but the love relationship between her sister Cecilia and family friend Robbie. The story unfolds from three central scenes. In the first, Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie in a lovers' tryst. Briony, observing unseen from a window, is 13 years old – naïve and innocent but with enough knowledge to understand that what she is watching is a love affair. The second scene involves a love letter from Robbie to Cecilia. Robbie makes Briony his messenger but she betrays him, opening the letter and reading it. Again naïvely, Briony mistakes Robbie's words as an attack on her sister. In the crucial third scene, Briony's cousin Lola is raped. Briony sees only the attacker's back but testifies that the attacker was Robbie. Her motive is to protect her sister. But she is responsible for destroying her sister's love and convicting an innocent man. She spends the rest of her life atoning for her crime.

The book is her letter of atonement – written to Robbie and to her sister Cecilia. It also puts on trial those who shared her crime – Lola and her real attacker, Paul Marshall – as well as those who allowed themselves to be blind – her mother, her father, her brother and the police. In her letter, Briony tries to rewrite the past. She also gathers evidence against suspects and witnesses. As readers we are asked to judge – who is guilty, who is innocent and who should pay the price?

From the outset, we can identify the gaze in *Atonement*. Again, this is not an academic exercise. Rather it is the gaze that helps us carve out the three crucial scenes from the narrative. This in turn enables us to explore the intersubjectivity between characters – how each character “sees” the scene, how they are displaced by it and how their actions are affected by it. Understanding the gaze affords us a deeper understanding of the literary text. It also allows us to see beyond the narrative to the transgressive questions that are being asked of society and of us.

In the first scene, Briony holds the first position. She is the innocent child who sees all but does not understand what she sees. Here Briony also stands in for society. Observing unseen from her family’s manor house, she is English Society, the Big Other, the social order that will be destroyed if the lovers are found out.

Robbie and Cecilia come from different sides of the social divide. Cecilia is heiress to a grand country estate. Robbie is the charlady’s son – smart and self-confident, breaking all the rules. He has been educated thanks to Cecilia’s father’s generosity

and has always been welcome in the family home although not without certain misgivings. Cecilia's mother is dubious about her husband's generosity and Cecilia refused to talk to Robbie during their university years. When their love blossoms – at home, in the summer holidays, on the hottest day of 1935 – the scene is both very public and very private. Cecilia is filling a vase with water from the fountain in front of the house. Robbie tries to help her, there is a tug of war and the vase breaks. Angry and goading him, Cecilia strips off her dress and plunges into the water to collect the missing pieces. Robbie, powerless, can only watch and observe.

Robbie is in the second position, that of the Queen in Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. He is aware of his love for Cecilia but it is a love that cannot speak its name. Cecilia is in the third position, the Minister's position. She takes the power in the scene and her actions punish Robbie for his ineptitude and class transgressions. That Briony observes from "one of the nursery's wide open windows" is significant (McEwan 2001, p. 37). She reads the scene like a child would a fairytale. As a budding young writer, she is writing a play about love. Her own childish writing is her only reference point, and her misunderstanding indicates her misunderstanding of love itself.

The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two storeys up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet (McEwan 2001, p. 39).

The writing, at this point, alerts us to the presence of another gaze in the scene. We detect here that there are two writers' voices. Though still in the third person, the text alludes to both the child writer Briony and another, older Briony – a *real* fiction writer who six decades later remembers the scene observed by the 13-year-old girl and “her subsequent accounts of it”.

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 folk tales, through drama with 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. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning that she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it (McEwan 2001, p. 41).

Here Briony surfaces as a potentially unreliable narrator, as a writer of *fiction*. But then the writing shifts from referring to Briony as the “she” of the older writer to referring to her again as “the young girl”. The point of view is blurred. We do not know whether we are reading the scene from the perspective of a young girl

condemning her sister's near-nakedness; or from the point of view of a narrator writing objectively, about amorality and "refusing to condemn":

*However **she** could not betray herself completely; there could be no doubt that some kind of revelation had occurred. When **the young girl** went back to the window and looked down, the damp patch on the gravel had evaporated. Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention. 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. Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's (McEwan 2001, pp. 41, emphasis added).*

In the gaze of the two Brionys, we see Briony's duplicity. The young Briony is in the first position. But the older Briony is in the third position – the detective-analyst position occupied by Lacan in his analysis of *The Purloined Letter*. Thus McEwan exploits the epistolary mode, using it to afford an investigation into the split subject – Briony as little girl/older woman, as innocent child/wicked teenager, and as subjective player/objective (though ultimately unreliable) narrator.

The letter writing in *Atonement* is not "to the moment". Briony first takes up her pen five years later and then again at various intervals over the course of her life. This presents us with two points of view, setting up the same detective-analyst position which we will later see occupied by Eva in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. Thus we

see the older Briony judging the younger naïve Briony in *Atonement*; just as the later Eva judges the earlier Eva in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. But *Atonement* is much more than just a remembered, subjective account set forward for our consideration. Both stories are told by unreliable narrators who withhold vital information to suppress their plot twists until the end. But *Atonement* asks more than just questions about our roles as parents and our creation of a good society.

Atonement digs a little deeper. It is a more complex, more mature work. It asks how society influences the ways we see and who we become. Also how we observe, remember and interact. Thus Briony the older writer (and indeed McEwan himself) shows us how our place in society can influence our interpretation of a given event, and in turn influence the position we find ourselves in society.

As she stood in the nursery waiting for her cousins' return she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself. She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view... And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have (McEwan 2001, p. 40).

What allows McEwan to take his psychoanalysis of society deeper is the use of the letter as signifier. As we have seen, the letter as signifier is a meaningless construct, a thing that sets the characters in motion, moving them from their initial positions to

take up other positions within the gaze structure. Similarly society is a senseless structure, inherited from previous generations without question or consideration, imposing an arbitrary viewing position on every person, a point of view from which they can only escape with difficulty.

Lacan's analysis of *The Purloined Letter* explores the concept of repetition automatism. This occurs when patients unconsciously repeat traumatic experiences, chasing the symbolic 'lost object' and repeating the experience of losing it in their own lives. Because the primordial loss occurs in the realm of the Symbolic – the breast, the bottle etc – the loss and the repetition of that loss is a symbolic one. It is only through the presence of a symbol that we can find something present in the face of absence (Muller & Richardson 1988, pp. 55, 56). This, of course, is Lacan's concept of language. We recall Eagleton's example of the Lilliputians carrying all their objects on their back. In Lacanian theory, it is from loss in the symbolic realm that language emerges. Words or symbols stand in for our unfulfilled desires. Hence Lacan's catch cry that the unconscious is structured like language. Or as Rivkin and Ryan write:

It is in the signifiers then, in language itself, that the unconscious, what of the unconscious that one can know, resides (1998, p. 125).

Lacan shows in his analysis of *The Purloined Letter* how the human psyche is constituted by signifiers. In other words, how our unconscious, coded and repressed, comprises signifiers rather than signifieds – complex chains of signs beneath which are hidden meanings (Eagleton 1996, pp. 166-168). Thus in a story in which the

letter is the signifier, we see how the characters act according to the movement of the signifier. In Lacan's words, the letter in *The Purloined Letter* shows "the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 29).

The concept of the letter as a symbol of absence fits nicely with our understanding of absence in epistolary literature. The letter is a symbol of the beloved's absence. Lacan too recognised this, noting that the letter is not an object that must "be *or* not be in a particular place". Rather it must "be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes". This is Lacan's concept of the "letter in sufferance". It can never be stolen, only displaced, and stays moving within the symbolic realm, going round and round like a charge in an electric circuit. The letter or the signifier "leaves its place, even though it returns to it by a circular path (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 43).

This is indeed what happens in the repetition automatism. What Freud teaches us...is that the subject must pass through the channels of the symbolic, but what is illustrated here is more gripping still: it is not only the subject, but the subjects, grasped in their intersubjectivity, who line up, in other words our ostriches... [who] model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 43).

We see this clearly in *Atonement*. The crucial letter-as-signifier is the one sent from Robbie to Cecilia. It displaces the characters from their original positions and

causes them to “relay” in the various positions of the gaze. Lacan suggests it is the structure of the gaze that creates the moment in which a single decision is made, setting the story on its course. In *The Purloined Letter*, it is the Minister’s theft of the letter. In *Atonement*, that is the moment that Briony opens Robbie’s letter to Cecilia.

The signifier, as we have seen, is all about lack. It is the sign that is noted yet not understood, that *signifies without being significant*. In *The Purloined Letter* what is written in the letter is never revealed, and this is precisely what interests Lacan. It does not matter that its content is unknown, it is a “symbol of a pact” and it places the Queen in a “symbolic chain foreign to the one which constitutes her faith”. That is, it undermines her loyalty to the King. As Lacan suggests:

*Love letter or conspiratorial letter, letter of betrayal or letter of mission,
letter of summons or letter of distress, we are assured if but one thing: the
Queen must not bring it to the knowledge of her lord and master* (Lacan in
Muller & Richardson 1988, pp. 41, 42).

Conversely in *Atonement*, we know what is written. But it is *the wrong letter* – the one with the offensive word, carelessly written down in a moment of sexual abandon, the slip of the tongue as it were, the wrong letter inserted in an envelope and sent by mistake. It is the fact of the wrong letter that becomes pure signifier in the story. This is the “signifier without a signified”, the *meaningless thing*. There is no meaning in Robbie choosing the wrong letter, no explanation for his unfortunate error. Here is the scene where Robbie writes his mirror-image two letters:

He tinkered with his draft for a further quarter of an hour, then threaded in new sheets and typed up a fair copy. The crucial lines now read: 'You'd be forgiven for thinking me mad – wandering in your house barefoot, or snapping your antique vase. The truth is, I feel rather light-headed and foolish in your presence, Cee, and I don't think I can blame the heat! Will you forgive me? Robbie.' Then after a few moments' reverie, tilted back on his chair, during which time he thought about the page at which his Anatomy tended to fall open these days, he dropped forwards 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 2001, pp. 85, 86).

With the word “cunt”, Robbie commits his only crime. Nonetheless, it is a crime against society, against proper protocol and he reveals himself as uncouth and working class. The word marks him out as unworthy of Cecilia's love and sets him up for his fall and punishment. It is also, of course, in purely Freudian terms, the very epitome of lack itself – the female sex organ as absence of a phallus. The choice of word doubles the absence – letter as symbol of absence; cunt as absence of the phallus. This double lack preempts the lack of love, of time, and of opportunity, that will doom Robbie and Cecilia's relationship. Had he sent the earlier version – a proper letter, abundant, artful and well-mannered – the story would not unfold as it does. Instead this lack-letter – the wrong word in the wrong letter – costs Robbie his life and his love.

If we follow this line of thought for a moment, we note also the presence of the broken vase. Though not the signifier, *per se*, the empty vessel is shaped like the female reproductive organs – another cunt. Significantly, it is a family heirloom, genuine Meissen porcelain dating from 1726. Cecilia and Robbie struggle with it and it breaks – symbolising the breakage that will happen in their love affair and in the social fabric of the estate. The fountain scene sets up the initial gaze structure. It also preempts the arrival of the pure signifier.

With the arrival of the letter, the positions shift. In the novel's second crucial scene, Briony moves to the third position. Her role is that of Poe's Minister, as she opens the envelope and reads its contents. In the third scene – after Lola's rape – she compounds her crime, setting the letter in sufferance by taking it from Cecilia's room and showing it to the gathered company – her mother, her brother, the police. The letter and Briony's testimony indict Robbie for a crime he did not commit. Lola and her rapist, Marshall, are also in the third position here. They take advantage of the situation by keeping quiet. They later marry and become a wealthy society couple. The later Briony, the detective-analyst Briony, suggests it is a marriage of convenience in which Lola has the high moral hand of blackmail.

Of Marshall she writes:

Perhaps he's spent a lifetime making amends (McEwan 2001, p. 357).

Of Lola:

Here she was, still as lean and fit as a racing dog, and still faithful. Who would have dreamed it? This, as they used to say, was the side on which her bread was buttered (McEwan 2001, p. 358).

And of their wedding:

It wasn't a surprise, the shock was in the confirmation. Briony was more than implicated in this union. She had made it possible (McEwan 2001, p. 358).

The (earlier) trial against Robbie is mimicked by their (later) “vigorous libel actions”, in which they defend their “good names with a most expensive ferocity” (McEwan 2001, pp. 357, 370).

The characters of Cecilia and Robbie are clearly in the second position in the second scene. Both are aware of what is going on, but they are unable to do anything to stop it. Though both of them have the opportunity to bring about social change – by fighting the system, by fighting for justice – they are cowered by the letter in sufferance. Cecilia, who has studied at Cambridge, chooses instead a vocation as a nurse, resigning herself to a traditional female role. Robbie enlists and is sent to the front to fight. He dies on the beach at Calais before allied boats can reach the troops.

In the position of the King are Briony’s father and the police detectives. The detective-analyst Briony is not critical of them – she charges them merely with being blind. Blame is attributed only in as much as they also represent the Big Other

– society and social order. The impotent, absent father and the hopeless detectives are metaphors for English society – an immovable behemoth, impervious to real justice and resistant to social change.

The senior inspector had a heavy face, rich in seams, as though carved from folded granite. She wanted the inspector to embrace her and comfort her and forgive her, however guiltless she was. But he would only look at her and listen. ‘It was him. I saw him’ (McEwan 2001, p. 174).

Briony’s mother is an intriguing character. Emily Tallis, we are told, sees all. She is the all-seeing detective, who wears dark glasses, just like Dupin’s green glasses – all the better to see what is going on around her. Many years of illness and migraine have given her a sixth sense:

...a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing. Only the truth came back to her, for what she knew, she knew. The indistinct murmur of voices heard through a carpeted floor surpassed in clarity a typed-up transcript; a conversation that penetrated a wall, or better, two walls, came stripped of all but its essential twists and nuances. She lay in the dark and knew everything (McEwan 2001, p. 66).

But like Poe’s Dupin, Emily is caught up in the game. Her hatred of Robbie and her desire to reinforce class distinctions means she too commits a crime. Unlike Lola and Marshall, she does not stay silent. Rather she pursues Robbie, demanding his

conviction and punishment. Her position in the gaze helps us to understand her role – someone who has the opportunity to endorse and bring about social change but refuses to do so. Ultimately, her powers are futile:

She could send her tendrils into every room of the house, but she could not send them into the future (McEwan 2001, p. 71).

These various roles allow us to see Briony's character in stark contrast. While Briony begins in the role of the innocent third, the letter brings about an awakening that sends her on a journey of self-discovery in which she moves from the position of the King, to that of the Minister, later to that of the detective-analyst. In a sense, though, Briony's gaze has always been dual. Even as the child Briony moves from first, to second, to third positions, the writer Briony has always remained in the third position – external to the action, observing, watching, transcribing. We have already seen this by way of the insertion of the writer's voice. But even as a child Briony is a writer-observer, analysing her family in plays and short stories. We see this in Emily's observation of her:

Her daughter was always off and away in her mind, grappling with some unspoken, self-imposed problem, as though the weary, self-evident world could be reinvented by a child (McEwan 2001, p. 68).

In part three of the novel, Briony's role is similar to that of Dupin. She is already compromised and does her work without distance or objectivity. Like Žižek's hard-boiled detective, she is "involved from the very beginning, caught up in the circuit:

this involvement defines (her) very subjective position” (1992b, p. 61). Žižek sums it up this way:

His acts (the detective’s acts) acquire an unforeseen dimension, he can hurt someone unknowingly – the guilt he thus contracts involuntarily propels him to ‘honour his debt’ (1992b, p. 63).

Similarly, Briony charts her own journey of personal atonement. She leaves home, and instead of “going up to Cambridge”, she trains as a nurse, which in wartime London is horrendous and demeaning work. She becomes the story’s villain and its hero. She attends Lola and Paul Marshall’s wedding, essentially to put Lola on notice:

All she wanted was for Lola to know she was there and to wonder why
(McEwan 2001, p. 327).

She also seeks out Cecilia and Robbie, apologising for her crime and asking for forgiveness. Robbie asks her to retract her evidence and to write a letter of atonement:

‘Then you’ll write to me in much greater detail. In this letter you’ll put absolutely everything you think is relevant. Everything that led up to you saying you saw me by the lake. And why, even though you were uncertain, you stuck to your story in the months leading up to my trial. If there were

pressures on you, from the police or your parents, I want to know. Have you got that? It needs to be a long letter' (McEwan 2001, p. 345).

But like Zizek's hard-boiled detective, Briony is not alone in her crime. She has been "played for a sucker" by Lola, the story's femme fatale. The story is essentially "a settling of accounts" with Lola, though Briony is twice too cowardly to confront her directly. Once in the church on her wedding day and once, in the book's final chapter, when she nearly bumps into her on the stairs of the museum. Also, Briony's novel cannot be published until Lola and Marshall are dead.

My fifty-nine-year assignment is over. There was our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine – and from the second version on I've set out to describe it. I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record. But as a matter of legal reality, so various editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir could never be published while my fellow criminals were alive. You may only libel yourself and the dead (McEwan 2001, p. 370).

However, Briony is a spectacularly unreliable narrator. She hides that fact that her writing is fiction. And it is not until the book's final chapter – a postscript as it were, entitled "London 1999" – that we realise the truth: almost the entire story is made up. Robbie died at war and Cecilia died in an underground bombing. They did not see each other again after Robbie's imprisonment. Briony did not see them either, and she never wrote the letter of atonement. Rather she presents the entire novel as her letter of atonement – signed with the initials BT (Briony Tallis) and

dated London 1999. Why does Briony sugar-coat the truth? And why does she feel the need to explain what really happened, to us, her readers?

The withholding of information is a narrative trick, just like in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. Briony excuses her unreliable narration, explaining that she does not see the point in refusing the lovers their happy end. But she is not “so self-serving” as to imagine them alive and happy at her 80th birthday party. She gives them their happiness together but does not allow them to forgive her.

What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish (McEwan 2001, p. 371).

This of course is a “text of pleasure” reading position. It is, as Žižek suggests, an act of “moral beauty” but it is contrary to the psychoanalytic ethic. In other words, “it intends to spare the other the confrontation with a truth” (1992b, p. 62). If we take a “text of jouissance” position, we can see that the fantasy story shields from us the blot in the picture.

Briony tells us the book is about love – “lovers and their happy endings”. Is the *objet petite a* in the book love? The barely consummated, only just bloomed love between Cecilia and Robbie that is nipped in the bud by Briony’s crime? In fact it is

this lack of love, and a desire to see it restored, that is the thing in the end that keeps us reading. The book is not in fact a book about love – rather it is about absence and impotence. An absent father, a vindictive mother, and the death of two young people in love. Their love is only kept alive in the (fictional) letters that they send each other. First while Robbie is in prison and later when he is at war. Thus it is the *objet petite a* – a lack, a hole, a *lacunae* – that thing that draws us in and sutures us into the scene we are viewing. When the fantasy is over, we see that we have been tricked. This is not a story of love and abundance, of true love conquering all. Rather, it is a story of absence and longing and destruction.

Briony's fantasy story operates to keep us from seeing the blot in the picture. As Žižek notes, true fantasy does not stage a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, rather it stages a scene that shows our desires as fulfilled (1992b, p. 6). It is a fine distinction, but clearly evident in *Atonement*. We are made aware in the novel's postscript that the entire story has been staged for us, to show our desires, and hers, fulfilled. In truth, our desire, as well as hers and theirs, has not been fulfilled. The whole spectacle is staged only to capture our desire.

The gaze that then confronts us is the gaze that stares back at us through the keyhole. These are Cecilia and Robbie's eyes, staring at us from beyond the grave. We know that the novel cannot be published until Lola and Marshall are dead, and that it is unlikely that Briony will outlive them. Thus the three of them also watch us from beyond the grave, observing our reactions, asking us to judge both their guilt and our own voyeurism. In this way the novel takes the questions of class, society and establishment that it has posed throughout, and redirects them at us. Would *we*

have tried to part the young lovers? Are *we* courageous enough to admit our faults and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt in disastrous ways? What is *our* place in the social order – are we the untouchable Marshalls, the resolutely classist Emily, the absent father who shirks his responsibility? And if Briony’s novel is a letter ultimately to us, what is her purpose, and McEwan’s through her? To whom, for whom and why does he/she write?

McEwan’s novel is ultimately political. His critique of wartime England extends beyond that to English society and society in general. Briony’s lies and cowardice are reflected in the external story – Britain at war. (The appeasement of Germany is alluded to by the work of Briony’s high-level public servant father, who hides from his family what he is doing towards preparations for the war.) And yet it is through their various ordeals that Briony, and England, come of age. McEwan makes both Briony and Cecilia nurses, toppling existing social order by casting them in a lower-class occupation that would nonetheless have a significant impact on women’s rights post-war. It is also no accident that the elderly Briony’s cabbie in the postscript is a “cheerful West Indian lad” at the LSE writing a doctoral thesis on property law in the developing world: “...he gave me his condensed version: no property law, therefore no capital, therefore no wealth” (p. 362).

England has changed and with it, the world. Though not completely. The West Indian cabbie appears only a few pages after we learn that Marshall has become extremely rich, well known for his donations to the Tate and his “generous funding of agricultural projects in sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 357). Imperial England is alive and well then, when West Indians are driving cabs and the upper class is donating to

the Tate. But this too shows a world on the brink. Marshall and his generation are close to death, leaving opportunity for change and growth. This is the question that McEwan poses to us – what kind of world do you want? What role do you wish to play? And what is your responsibility to generations of the future? Thus the addressee, and indeed, the ultimate destination is to us, the reader. Again, the moment we realise this is the moment that we see the dead gazes of Briony, Robbie, Cecelia and the Marshalls gazing back at us through the keyhole. Are we complicit, the book asks us? Do we support the system or do we condemn and reject it? When viewed as a text of *jouissance*, McEwan's novel "crackles, caresses, grates, cuts" with these questions (Barthes 1975, p. 67). The novel asks the same question as Barthes: 'Me, me what am I doing in all that?' (1975, p. 29).

Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic and Real also play their part in *Atonement*. The absent father and the ineffectual mother mean the children have the run of the house. When Leon arrives home we see the status quo: "Emily's lying down" and the "Old Man's staying in town" (p. 48). But Leon too is ineffectual as a father figure – "Leon, who had the pure gift of avoiding responsibility, would not assume his father's role" (p. 102). Cecilia notes that her "parents were absent in their different ways" (p. 103) and she is left to play the adult, resolving the dispute between her mother and the kitchen staff (p. 105), "being everyone's mother again" (p. 107). Robbie threatens this symbolic family dynamic: "Something irreducibly human, or male, threatened the order of their household, and Briony knew that unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer" (p. 114). But Briony is never

subjected to symbolic castration – by her own family or by Robbie or Cecilia – and thus her crime goes unpunished.

The use of the word “cunt” marks the entry of the Real. It is the thing that traumatises the subject (Briony) and the Big Other of society, exposing the fallibility of the social constructs that the family cling to. But this also frees up the social constructs, as Todd McGowan writes in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*:

The hold that symbolic authority has over subjects depends on the avoidance of the traumatic real that exposes the imposture of all authority. When the subject experiences the traumatic real, it recognises symbolic authority's failure to account for everything. This is the key to the political power of the gaze. Though the encounter with the gaze traumatises the subject, it also provides the basis for the subject's freedom - freedom from the constraints of the big Other (2007, p. 16).

It is the use of the Real that turns this novel into a political novel. It cuts Briony loose and turns her into a political savant. It also reminds us that the Symbolic and indeed society is a fragile structure indeed.

Atonement is social criticism in the honoured tradition of the epistolary novel. It challenges the class structure that existed in wartime England and still exists in England today. McEwan politicises what is not political (love) and de-politicizes what is (the war). In the end the war is won but everything is lost – the lovers, the people, the grand family manor house which is, in the end, converted into a hotel for tourists.

Fundamentally *Atonement* is a book about writing. It is a master class in structure, character and the all-powerful God-like narrator. It both mines the epistolary genre and rejects it. Cecilia is reading Richardson's *Clarissa*, though she comments that she'd rather read Fielding any day. Like *Clarissa*, the novel has multiple points of view but it also uses the voice of a single omniscient narrator. British critic Russell Celyn Jones suggests McEwan is fully aware of the epistolary genre's strengths and failures. He also charges McEwan with using the omniscient narrator in order to undermine it and show its inherent fallibility.

It might seem a pity to deface this beautiful imitation of a 19th-century novel with Post-Modern signposts, yet there is a reason for it. Omniscient narrators are at odds with (McEwan's) secular, post-Joycean view (Celyn Jones 2001).

What McEwan succeeds in doing is blending traditional epistolary with the narrated monologue pioneered by Jane Austen. Indeed an excerpt from *Northanger Abbey* is the book's epigram, setting up the same questions that McEwan asks:

Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this... (McEwan 2001)

Atonement mines all the usual traditional epistolary characteristics. We see the trial motif, exile and loneliness, self-identity and the absent lover. But what we also find is an exploration of letters themselves. Robbie's letter is the signifier in the story. But in fact there are eight different letters in the text, each a signifier in its own right, each making up a signifying chain. A solicitor's letter sent to Robbie's mother informs her that she has freehold title to the bungalow on the Tallis estate, thus placing her son forever between two worlds – not truly working class, but not truly a member of the upper class either. Robbie's mistaken letter to Cecilia "unlocks her", allowing their romance to unfold. The twins' letter of escape sent to the gathered company sets up the scene in which the rape will occur. Emily's letters to Briony alert her to their crumbling family home, with its iron fences melted to make Spitfires and its rooms taken over by wartime refugees. Finally a series of letters prompt Briony to begin to take account for her actions: a letter from her father alerts her to the marriage of Lola and Paul Marshall; an editor's letter to the young writer Briony exposes the true cowardice of her behaviour, which in turn prompts her to write to her sister, seeking forgiveness. When her sister doesn't respond, Briony goes to visit her. There, she meets Robbie who asks her to write the letter of atonement.

The novel also considers the line between what is public and private in letter writing. In the 18th and 19th centuries, letters were frequently read aloud. This

practice is echoed, but with a difference, when Briony purloins Cecilia's letter and brings it downstairs for everyone to read. Briony knows it is wrong to read Cecilia's letter but she feels justified that she is "catching a killer".

[T]hough the shock of the message vindicated her completely, this did not prevent her from feeling guilty. It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential for her to know everything (McEwan 2001, p. 113).

Personal letters in the novel have great social worth. They are symbols of the love between two people; and at war, Robbie carries Cecilia's letters "buttoned into the inside pocket of his greatcoat" (McEwan 2001, p. 203). They also hold great documentary value; after their deaths, Briony gives the same letters to the archives of the British War Museum.

The fallacy and failure of letters is also revealed. In prison, Robbie's letters are subject to dual censorship – himself and his psychiatrist. Like Bellow's *Herzog*, he eases himself through madness by writing. But what Cecilia reads are not his true thoughts:

When he wrote back, he pretended to be his old self, he lied his way into sanity. For fear of his psychiatrist, who was also their censor, they could never be sensual or even emotional (McEwan 2001, p. 204).

Finally, the novel also presents a meditation on the gaze. Each character exists within a watchful prism – society's gaze, the family's gaze. Everyone is watched,

unable to hide or find privacy. Thus the avoidant Old Man stays in town, avoidant Emily seeks solace through illness, Cecilia and Robbie attempt to find privacy in the library. As children, Cecilia and Leon share funny looks, always trying to avoid the gaze of their parents. Later, when Cecilia is watched by her mother, she adopts an expression of “amused curiosity” as she reads Robbie’s lurid letter.

Commendably it was a look she was able to maintain as she took in the small block of typewriting and in a glance absorbed it whole – a unit of meaning whose force and colour was derived from the single repeated word (McEwan 2001, p. 111).

Robbie and Cecilia try to avoid society’s gaze, yet are watched on all sides. By their “bemused childhood selves” (p. 135), by “an invisible presence or witness in the room” (p. 137) and of course by Briony:

Ahead of him, about a hundred yards away...was a white shape... It was motionless and he assumed he was being watched. It was a child, he saw now, and therefore it must be Briony...(McEwan 2001, p. 93)

Interestingly, McEwan introduces a clairvoyant quality to epistolary. This is a characteristic that is not identified in the existing epistolary scholarship. But it can be clearly seen in this case study as well as *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *In A Strange Room*. Like other contemporary epistolary correspondents, Briony writes in

the past tense. But McEwan makes much of the fact that Briony already knows the future. Prescience is a motif in the story, and our correspondent's knowingness evokes the feel of a courtroom drama.

On two occasions within half an hour, Cecilia stepped out of her bedroom, caught sight of herself in the gilt-frame mirror at the top of the stairs and immediately dissatisfied, returned to her wardrobe to reconsider (McEwan 2001, p. 96).

Within the half hour, Briony would commit her crime (McEwan 2001, p. 156).

Everything that is to happen has already occurred. Only judgment is to come. Thus we see Briony punishing Lola for her sins, even before her sin is committed. She beats a field of nettles with a switch:

[S]everal nettles were Lola too...cut down with an outrageous lie on her lips. Then she rose again, brazen with her various sins – pride, gluttony, avarice, unco-operativeness – and for each she paid with a life (McEwan 2001, p. 74).

In the same nettle field, Briony attempts to escape her own childhood, anticipating the end of innocence that is yet to come:

Flaying the nettles was becoming a self-purification, and it was childhood she set about now, having no further need for it (McEwan 2001, p. 74).

Intriguingly, Robbie's mother is a clairvoyant. Though a minor character, this is not accidental. Emily Tallis is something of a clairvoyant too, reading and interpreting the household from her sick bed. But when Robbie is wrongly convicted, only his mother guesses the truth. Grace Turner is seen running after the police car shouting: "Liars! Liars! Liars!" (McEwan 2001, p. 186). Emily Tallis, on the other hand, pursues Robbie in the courts for a conviction.

This same comparing and contrasting of characters operates throughout the book. Honesty is explored through the yin-and-yang characters of Briony and Lola. Ideals of love between the two couples – Cecilia and Robbie and Lola and Marshall. Also the two "sexual attacks" – Robbie's lovemaking to Cecilia compared to Marshall's callous attack on Lola. At each point in the story, two standards of morality exist. Even at the end we are offered two reading positions. Briony chooses not to conjure up Cecilia and Robbie at her 80th birthday party. Through her writing she has forgiven herself and put the dead to rest. But the writer cannot be prosecution, defence, judge and jury. In the end that choice is left to the reader:

If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at The Trials of Arabella? It's not impossible. But now I must sleep. (McEwan 2001, p. 372).

5. Case study analysis – *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003)

We Need To Talk About Kevin is an epistolary novel in the traditional sense of the word. The narrative comprises a series of fictional letters sent from Eva Khatchadourian to her husband Franklin. The letters begin two years after the couple's 16-year-old son Kevin is jailed for the murder of nine people in a Columbine-style high school massacre. Like the nun in *The Portuguese Letters*, Eva does not receive a response from Franklin. The novel is more of a “responence” than a “correspondence” and we are led to believe that the couple has separated or divorced (Shriver 2003, p. 385). It is not until the closing pages that we learn Kevin has also murdered Franklin and younger sister Celia as well.

The novel is written in the first person and presented from the perspective of the fictional female correspondent Eva. However, Shriver creates a convincing dialogue between the couple, recreating Franklin's presence, voice and reactions in a way that Monica Latham describes as “polyphonic”:

The flow of thought depends on the addressee's response, and even if this response is not actually voiced or verbally expressed, it is nevertheless taken into account by the thinker (Latham 2009, p. 133).

It is increasingly rare to find an epistolary novel (in the strictest sense of the word) on the bookshelf. As one reviewer wrote on its release:

[T]he strangest thing about Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk About Kevin is that this thoroughly contemporary tale employs an old-fashioned fictional form (Mullan 2008).

Mullan suggests Shriver chooses letters as a means of self-conscious explanation. He reflects that she has “rediscovered the combination of intimacy and antagonism” that characterises letters between lovers. Yet he argues that contemporary epistolary fiction written in letter format faces the same problematic that it faced in Richardson’s day: “We must accept that she would have the time to write so copiously and so eloquently” (Mullan 2008).

For Shriver, the epistolary genre was merely an afterthought. In an interview with an online literary magazine she commented:

The letters are thinly disguised bog-standard chapters...making the chapters ‘letters’ entailed little more than adding ‘Dear Franklin’ at the beginning and ‘Love, Eva’ at the end. In other words, the epistolary conceit is decorative (Lawless 2005).

Yet Shriver’s epistolary influences run deeper than she may imagine. We find in her book the same themes that have recurred in epistolary for more than three centuries – writing in the absence of the beloved, mourning the inadequacies of language, staging revolt through the act of writing and transgressing social mores. What we see most notably is the trial motif. As well as the usual absent lover’s trial-by-letter, Eva puts herself, us and society on trial.

From the outset, Eva herself is on trial. She eats the eggs that another mother smashes in her shopping trolley, casting herself as guilty and deserving of punishment. America too is on trial. Eva is from an Armenian family and never feels at home in America. She visits 'Franklin's America' with him, eating McDonalds, visiting the Grand Canyon and going to baseball games. However this America does not really exist. The same grand nation produces teenagers who shoot each other, and its rock-solid foundations can come crashing down at any moment.

I was visiting your country. The one you had made for yourself, the way a child constructs a log cabin out of Popsicle sticks (Shriver 2003, p. 44).

The external narrative emphasises the trial theme. The story is set against the backdrop of the 2000 US presidential election, in which Vice President Al Gore lost to George W Bush. The novel mocks democracy just as it mocks the family. However Shriver does not seek to decide the case. Rather she points out there is no clear winner, just as there will be no clear winner in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*.

In considering the questions that define epistolary – to whom, for whom and why does one write? – it would be easy to give straight forward answers. That is, Eva writes to her husband Franklin, to console herself, as she attempts to come to terms with her son's horrendous crime. Indeed we are reminded of Shklovsky's incantation to Alya: *You write about me – for yourself; I write about myself – for you* (Shklovsky 1971, p. 78).

But like *Zoo*, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is a transgressive novel in a transgressive genre. And like Shklovsky, Eva does not in fact just write for herself. She writes for herself, for her son, for her husband and for her daughter. She also writes for America and for us. Her letters, as we will see, have a greater agenda.

At first glance, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is a meditation on modern parenting. Several questions come into play: Who is to blame for Kevin's psychopathic killing spree? Was he born bad or is Eva a bad mother? What causal factors lie behind high school shootings? And, in the case of Eva, what complexities surround her decision to have a baby and how did her parenting influence her son's nature?

These questions, of course, are only a starting point. A Lacanian critique takes us beyond the obvious. Thus we must read beyond what has been said, conscious of what is omitted or lacking; or what stands out because it is excessive, repeated or overwrought. Žižek compares the psychoanalytic critic to the detective. We look beyond the ordinariness of the scene, a scene assembled by the murderer (or the author in fact) to throw the detective off the scent.

The scene's organic, natural quality is a lure, and the detective's task is to denature it by first discovering the inconspicuous details that stick out, that do not fit into the frame of the surface image (Žižek 1992b, p. 53).

If we go *looking* for lack it is almost certain that we will not find it. Or worse, we will find only what the murderer/author wishes us to see. Lacan begins his analysis of Poe's story by identifying the structure of the tale which in turn allows him to identify the gaze. By identifying the gaze, he identifies intersubjectivity. And by identifying intersubjectivity, he can identify the blot. The gaze and the blot are crucial to *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. They are crucial too to the enduring nature of epistolary.

Where is the gaze in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*? What relationships does it help us see? And how in turn can this help us identify the blot – the space where our gaze is already sutured in, where we find the Other staring back at us?

The first gaze belongs to Franklin. He is the King who sees everything but does not understand. He sees Kevin as a good boy who does not act out of malice or hatred, but is misunderstood and maligned like any other awkward child. This blindness reveals itself as the narrative progresses. Franklin does not believe his son is responsible for damaging his friend's bike; for throwing a rock from an overhead bridge; or for manufacturing a sexual assault allegation against his teacher.

Eva occupies the second position. She is aware of her son's duplicity and that Franklin does not see it. Yet she dare not reveal her fears to Franklin. To do so would jeopardise the Symbolic structure of their family, her social standing as wife and mother. Instead she keeps quiet and questions her own guilt.

Oh, I don't remember all the incidents that year aside from the fact that there were several, which you tagged with the umbrella dismissal, "Eva, every boy pulls a few pigtails." I spared you a number of accounts, because for me to report any of our son's misbehaviour seemed like telling on him. I ended up reflecting badly not on him but on myself (Shriver 2003, p. 216).

Kevin is the all-seeing third. He goads his blind father and torments his delusional mother. He plays the good all-American kid for Franklin but reveals his darker side to Eva.

"Hey Kev...how about some Frisbee? We've just got time to work on that bank shot of yours before dinner."

"Sure, Dad!" I remember watching Kevin streak off to the closet to fetch the Frisbee and puzzling. Hands fisted, elbows flying, he looked for all the world like a regular rambunctious kid, exhilarated at playing in the yard with his father. Except that it was too much like a regular kid; almost studied. I had the same queasy feeling on weekends when Kevin would pipe up – yes, pipe up – "Gosh Dad, it's Saturday! Can we go see another battlefield?" (p. 216)

Franklin and Eva are more complex and sympathetic than the King and the Queen in *The Purloined Letter*. Eva wants Franklin to acknowledge their son's pathological behaviour. She wants desperately for the classical Oedipal structure to work – for her husband to step in as authority figure and impose a sense of order. Franklin does not do this. He is a kind yet ineffectual man, blinded by his own version of the Perfect American Family. This is artfully depicted when Franklin buys their home.

Built from teak, it has skylights, slanted ceilings and rooms without doors. Eva describes it as a house “on Zoloft” (p. 156).

You had bought us some other family's Dream Home...I could barely keep my balance as our new acquisition exuded wave after wave of stark physical ugliness. Why couldn't you see it? (p. 158)

This plaintive question has greater resonance. Why can't Franklin see what is happening to his own son?

Within this gaze-structure, Franklin and Eva play a dual role. Franklin symbolises both the Other and the Big Other. He is the unseeing father and ineffectual husband, as well as society, social order and the natural law. In this sense, he is what Lacan describes as the Name-of-the-Father – not the Father as such, but a symbol of the law, an authority figure that steps in to impose order and force the repression of inappropriate desires. Eva must maintain her mask, like the Queen, so that society does not discover she is a fraud. From the outside, she is the Perfect Mother. She bakes, she cooks, she drives her children to school. But secretly, she is a bad mother who does not love her son and wishes that he had never been born. The Other (Franklin) and the Big Other (society) must not know.

Franklin's blindness allows Eva to engage in petty wars with Kevin. They can indulge in their battles, as long as the Other does not know. Kevin seizes the opportunity to indulge his desires and drives, free from repression, free from the threat of symbolic castration. Thus like Poe's Minister, Kevin has all power over

Eva. This is made clear when Eva loses her temper and breaks Kevin's arm. This forces Eva and Kevin into a pact before the unseeing Franklin.

Why didn't he blab? By all appearances, he was protecting his mother. All right. I'll allow for that. Nevertheless, a balance sheet calculation may have entered in. Before a distant expiry date, a secret accrues interest by dint of having been kept...(p. 237)

On the same day of the pact, Kevin stops wearing a nappy and uses the toilet for the first time. The violence draws Kevin out of the Imaginary – his failed potty training evokes Freud's anal drive – and into the Symbolic. Eva is also forced to acknowledge the "honesty" of her actions.

For once I'd known myself for his mother. So he may have known himself also...for my son (p. 238).

This scene is not just a Freudian fancy. In questioning Eva and Franklin's parenting, the novel questions society. Should children be coddled? Or should parents use more force? This transgressive challenging is typical of the epistolary genre. Ultimately, that same question is levelled at Franklin, at America and at us.

The Oedipus complex unravels properly when Franklin and Eva decide to divorce. When a bottle of drain cleaner is left out and Celia gets it in her eye, Eva has no doubt Kevin is to blame. Franklin on the other hand blames his wife.

“Franklin, this story doesn’t add up. Never mind for now why it was out, all right? He did it! Oh, Franklin, he did it –“

“I’m ashamed of you, ashamed,” you said...(pp. 342, 343)

The social bonds dissolve the moment the Other can no longer ignore them. Eva reveals her fears to Franklin, alerting him (the Other) to her true feelings. At the same time, Kevin reveals himself, dropping the “Ron Howard” impression and telling his father he “doesn’t give a fuck” about baseball, Frisbee or the civil war (p. 426). The same day, Kevin murders his classmates.

What then is the signifier in the story? The meaningless thing that propels the characters on the path? The answer is Kevin’s bow and arrow.

Eva buys Kevin the book of Robin Hood “on a hunch”. There is no meaning to her choice, and similarly she can give no meaning to Kevin’s passion for the book and ultimately archery. Kevin’s passion for archery stands out because it is unusual and meaningless. Ultimately too his weapon is designed to be meaningless:

But best of all, if he accomplished his stunt entirely with a mere crossbow, his mother and all her mush-headed liberal friends wouldn’t be able to parade him before Congress as one more poster boy for gun control. In short, his choice of weapon was meant to ensure to the best of his ability that Thursday would mean absolutely nothing (Shriver 2003, p. 423).

After the shooting, the positions shift. Eva moves into the position of the analyst, analyzing her earlier self, as well as Franklin and society, presenting us and America with her letters for reading. Kevin, now, is in the second position, looking for the first time “confused, bereft” (p. 462). Importantly, we see Franklin’s ‘undead’ gaze for the first time, revealing itself as the blot in the picture.

Until now, Shriver has offered us a fantasy scenario. Just like the fantastic goings-on in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* that distract us from the loathing James Stewart feels for Grace Kelly, Eva’s “fantasy letters” distract us from the truth of what has happened. The blot in *Rear Window* is “the gaze of the Other” (Žižek 1992b, p. 91). Similarly, the blot in Shriver’s story is the gaze of Franklin, the Other. Eva’s engrossing and skillful letters lull us into complacency. And when her fantasy gives way we meet Franklin’s ‘undead’ gaze.

The blot anticipates our spectatorship in the story. It is the thing in the story that is missing or out of place. The hole or *lacuna* in the picture. The point of lack, of absence, of exclusion. It is the thing that fascinates us, that keep us reading. It is the question that we ask throughout the story: Where is Franklin?

In epistolary, the blot makes us complicit. We see the blot only as we are walking away, leaving the scene of Kevin’s crime. But from the outset Franklin has been watching us watching him – watching us as we read *his letters*, observing us from the other side of the keyhole, looking at us from beyond the grave. Thus Lacan’s question – to whom does the letter belong? – is the key to understanding the story.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the letters belong to Franklin. Just as in *Lolita*, Humbert's letters really belong to the dead Lolita – the undead schoolgirl/woman to whom his confession must really be addressed and who rises from the dead through the fiction to settle her accounts with Humbert.

The horror we feel when we realise Franklin is dead – Eva is writing letters to her *dead* husband – is the first moment we look into Franklin's eyes. Thus, we move from spectators to voyeurs. We are pulled into the picture, we become “the subjects” in the story. The moment we see Franklin's gaze, we see for the first time that we too are seen. In Franklin's gaze, we find our *objet petite a*, the object-cause of our desire.

In epistolary, the *objet petite a* is the means of our seduction. Here, it is Eva's desire for her estranged husband Franklin, rediscovered after his death and rekindled through her letters. Eva's desire for Franklin becomes our desire, just as in *The Portuguese Letters* the nun's desire becomes our desire too. Desire is at the heart of epistolary writing. But, as Žižek suggests, we desire something only in its absence or because it does not exist. The *objet petite a* is a tangible grief “begot by nothing” (Žižek 1992b, p. 12). Thus letters create the frame that turns this absence into a tangible thing. They distort the normal images – the family break-downs, the broken relationships etc – that we find in other fictional genres and operate instead like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, allowing us to experience more completely the desire that the letter writer feels for their absent lover. Letters force us to look at the picture *awry*, viewing absence as presence and lack of love as an abundance of it. But like the skull, they are the kiss of death. When we are finally able to see clearly,

when the fantasy is revealed, when our eyes are unclouded by desire, we see that we have been tricked. This is not a story of love and abundance. Rather, it is a story of absence and longing.

The irony of the murdered father is that he will always return to settle his accounts. This is Lacan's concept of "between two deaths". In *Antigone*, the heroine is caught between two deaths – her symbolic death and her actual death, as she demands her brother's proper burial. Likewise, Hamlet's father returns as a ghost who demands that his son avenge his murder. The dead return only when they have not been given proper burial. Murdering the father does not bring about access to pleasure. Rather, the dead father returns and returns stronger than before.

After the parricide, the former reigns as the Name-of-the-Father, the agent of the symbolic law that irrevocably precludes access to the forbidden fruit of enjoyment (Žižek 1992b, p. 24).

Kevin's request to Eva that she bury Celia's glass eye is in fact a request to bury the undead Franklin.

Staring at the table, he shoved the box a little farther toward me, then removed his hand. "Anyway I thought you might take this and, well, maybe you could you know –"

“Bury it,” I finished for him. It was an enormous request, for along with his dark-stained homemade coffin I was to bury a great deal else (Shriver 2003, p. 465).

By identifying the blot in the character of Franklin, we start to see the true brilliance of Shriver’s novel. Franklin stands for what is good in America. He believes a man can have a house, a wife, a child, and *be happy*. It is the same story that we, as readers, tell ourselves too. But this is a myth – a false reality, based on the repression of our unconscious desires and drives. It is the *objet petite a* – the by-product of our real desires, the “surplus make-believe” as Žižek calls it (1992b, p. 8). As readers we see the ghost of the undead Franklin staring back at us, through the keyhole, challenging us to ask ourselves the same question that is echoed throughout the book – why do children murder their parents and classmates?

What is significant is that Shriver is asking us that question. This happens in this moment we perceive Franklin’s gaze, when we realise our own gaze has already been anticipated, that we are *seen being seen*. Thus the text asks *us*: what about *your* role as a parent? What about *your* role in creating our society? What about *your own repressed desires*? Do *you* desire to murder your father? Do you long to be *seen* by society, to be *watched* instead of always *watching*?

It is Kevin who directly asks us this final question:

“The way I see it, the world is divided into the watchers and the watchees, and there’s more and more of the audience and less and less to see. People

who actually do anything are a goddamned endangered species” (Shriver 2003, p. 415).

Eva takes up the position of detective-analyst herself. Crucially, Shriver abandons Samuel Richardson’s writing to the moment. She writes instead in the past tense, two years after Franklin’s death. The letters are no less descriptive and evocative – Eva paints her scenes in minute detail. But in the past tense, two years later, her letters bear the hallmark of psychoanalysis. An older wiser character now, she turns her own keen eye to her past behaviours.

Writing letters enables Eva to be both patient and doctor (Latham 2009). This is a common feature of contemporary epistolary and a significant shift away from the epistolary of the past. We see it in LP Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, in Nabakov’s *Lolita* and in Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*. We also see it in *Atonement* and *In A Strange Room*. Writing at a point much later than the events concerned allows epistolary correspondents to reflect and confess. Some correspondents – Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Eva in *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and Briony in *Atonement* – also attempt to rewrite their past. Thus they come to occupy the third position, analysing themselves through their writing. As Latham writes of Eva:

She plays both the role of the analysand, who confesses her upsetting experiences, and the analyst, who keeps record of her confessions – this is all the more true as the letters she writes will never be sent (2009, p. 135).

Does the reader ever occupy a position within the gaze? As readers, are we deliberately kept in the dark, the innocent third who must not know all? I would argue this is not the case. We are voyeurs whose gaze is anticipated. We hold a voyeuristic gaze that is sutured in by the blot. But we are neither the blind King, nor the opportunistic Minister, nor the detective Dupin, nor the master-analyst Lacan. As readers, we exist outside the text.

Lacan is enigmatic about the position of the reader. In his seminar on *The Purloined Letter* he notes only that the reader is “kept in suspense” by the deceit of the detective story and cautions “us” (as readers) against being taken in by the “amateur detective” who he describes as a “prototype of a latter-day swashbuckler” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, pp. 33, 34).

But further reading supports our argument. We refer again to Johnson’s passage from the French *Ecrits* that suggests both author and reader exist outside the story:

[T]he letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author without anyone’s ever bothering to worry about what is meant (cited in Johnson 1977, p. 464).

Lacan has been criticised for excluding the role of the narrator in his analysis²³. In *The Purloined Letter*, a ‘bystander’ narrator frames the story – a friend of Dupin’s friend who recounts the story again for the reader’s benefit. Only occasionally does this happen in epistolary. A case in point is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where the protagonist recounts his adventures at sea in letters home to his sister. More often, the addressee is intimately involved in the story. And though editors are frequently used as a framing device, they are usually contained to a preface or epilogue. Thus the narrator is not at issue in contemporary epistolary.

What then of the author’s gaze? Lacan’s only reference to the role of the author is to note that: “No doubt Poe is having a good time...” (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 37) Felman argues that author and analyst share the same position in the Poe tale, suggesting that *The Purloined Letter* might specifically be a story about “the poet’s superiority in the art of concealment”. Dupin is a poet, the Minister is a poet, Poe is a poet and Lacan is a poet.

²³ In her influential paper *The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida*, Johnson considers Lacan’s seminar and Derrida’s famous criticism of it. She opens up for discussion “the question of the act-of-reading(-literature)” (1977, p. 457). Her analysis is in response to Derrida’s challenge that Lacan’s seminar omits, inter alia, the role of the narrator. Johnson contends:

Lacan, far from excluding the narrator, situates him in the dynamic functioning of the text, as a reader en abyme duped by Dupin’s trick explanations of his technique; a reader who, however, unconscious of the non-sequiturs he is repeating, is so much in awe of his subject that his admiration blinds us to the tricky functioning of what he so faithfully transmits (Johnson 1977, p. 501).

Chambers notes that most Poe criticism gives authority to the figure of Dupin, with both the narrator and the reader assumed to be “dull-witted dupes” (in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 305). Gallop considers that the reader enters the frame through the narrator. She suggests that the analyst in the Poe text is neither Dupin, who fits the “image” of the classical analyst, nor the “master-analyst” Lacan. Rather, she says it is the “neutral, nearly selfless” narrator who functions as “the pure mirror of an unruffled surface”. The narrator, she says, functions as the reader’s “double”, such that she enters the text through him (1985, pp. 72, 73).

In Lacan's interpretation, however, the poet's superiority can only be understood as the structural superiority of the third position with respect to the letter: the minister in the first scene, Dupin in the second scene, both poets. But the third position is also – this is the main point of Lacan's analysis – the position of the analyst. It follows that, in Lacan's approach, the status of the poet is...that of the analyst (Felman 1987, p. 48).

Like McEwan, Shriver positions herself as political commentator. She is an American who lives in London and has made a career out of criticising American society. She is childless. She is also a journalist. Her profession has been as a watcher and observer of people. No doubt she is having fun too, watching us as we are watched through the keyhole.

What her novel becomes, it can be argued, is essentially an open letter to America. And if every novel is essentially an open letter – a communiqué on a subject of interest from an individual author to an individual reader that ultimately reveals more about the author than the subject he or she chooses to write about – then Shriver's use of the epistolary form has double meaning. Eva is writing to Franklin. Shriver is writing to America. This is not just a text of pleasure, it is a text of *jouissance* which uses the epistolary form to reinforce the importance of its own message. It attempts to change, subvert and challenge the status quo, and this, it is clear, is Shriver's *raison d'être*. Johnson describes such transgressive texts as “performative”.

To be fooled by a text implies that the text is not constative but performative, and that the reader is in fact one of its effects. The text's "truth" puts the status of the reader in question, "performs" him as its "address". Thus "truth" is not what fiction reveals as a nudity behind a veil. The play between truth and fiction, reader and text, message and feint, has become impossible to unravel into an "unequivocal" meaning (1977, p. 501).

Lacan concludes his analysis with the observation *a letter always arrives at its destination* (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988, p. 53). Johnson offers her own translation:

It is up to the reader to give the letter...what he will find as its last word: its destination (Johnson 1977, p. 501).

In *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, just as in *Atonement*, the final destination – the final question – rests with us. *Look at your own family, your own society*, Shriver tells us. *Take a look at your own gaze first.*

6. Case study analysis: *In a Strange Room* by Damon Galgut (2010)

Damon Galgut's *In A Strange Room* is strange on all accounts. It is a work of non-fiction presented as fiction, which blends first and third person, and is written by a writer who calls himself Damon. The book is also unusual in that it is a triptych of novellas, named respectively *The Follower*, *The Lover* and *The Guardian*. As Galgut told the broadcaster Ramona Koval, every human relationship has one or all of these attributes:

[I]t seems to me that these three kinds of relationships define the primary forms of connection that human beings can have (Koval 2011).

Yet Galgut's purpose is transgressive and destabilising. He sets out to question normal societal relationships, challenging the ties that exist between people, and the borders that exist between countries. Damon's ties are fragile and wisp-thin. At the end of a relationship with a man he claims to have loved, Damon has only the scrap of paper on which the lover wrote his name:

They write down each other's addresses. The only piece of paper he has is an old bank statement...Now years later as I write this it lies in front of me on my desk, folded and creased and grubby, carrying its little cargo of names, its different sets of handwriting, some kind of impression of that instant pushed into the paper and fixed there (Galgut 2010, p. 88).

In A Strange Room does not attempt to reclaim the epistolary genre. It is not written in letter form or written for a specified addressee. The manuscript is not signed or studded with epistolary references. Yet the same thematic concerns are present – writing, exile, loneliness, unrequited love, self-identity and trial.

The very act of writing also signals the novel as epistolary. Each novella is a journey and Damon recalls his travels through writing. The narrative follows a young South African as he takes three different journeys. The first he takes with a German backpacker named Reiner. The second sees him follow a group of backpackers through Africa and to Europe. On the third he travels with a female friend to India, discovering only after they set off that her mental illness is debilitating.

In this way, *In A Strange Room* captures the essence of travel writing and evokes a series of letters home. The narrative shines with recounted scenes, descriptions of landscape, snippets of conversation and interactions with fellow travellers.

The stars are seeding themselves in bright beds overhead, the earth is huge and old and black. It's long past suppertime when he arrives at the edge of the little village and goes up the deserted main street, the shops and restaurants shuttered and barred, all the windows unlit... (Galgut 2010, p. 5)

But like Shklovsky in *Zoo*, Galgut also seeks to expose the artificiality of writing. His narrative mode subverts the usual formal requirements, switching from first person to third person, and sometimes even second, within the same paragraph. It

also undermines the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. As Galgut told Koval, all the stories are factual. Yet the book was shortlisted in the Man Booker Prize for fiction.

[T]here is nothing made up in these pieces, these are pieces of recollection, these three journeys I made at different points in my life. This first journey into the mountains in Lesotho with Reiner took place in my 20s... The second and third journeys took place in my 30s, the first in my early 30s and the second one in my late 30s (Koval 2011).

Like each epistolary narrator, Damon is a *writer*. He unfurls himself across the page, defining ‘the self’ in relation to the Other(s) he meets on the road. Though we are never told that Damon is a white South African, in *The Follower* the whiteness of Damon’s skin is defined against Reiner’s all-black attire. In *The Lover*, the Other is the young Swiss Jerome. Jerome has “a beauty that is almost shocking, red lips and high cheek-bones and a long fringe of hair” (p. 73) and Damon falls in love with him. Though Damon never describes his own looks or background, we see his character as everything Jerome is not. Like Alya in *Zoo*, Jerome represents wealth, beauty and old world Europe. Damon represents the uncertainty and harshness of new-world South Africa – alienation, racial politics and barren landscapes. His social isolation is a metaphor for his homosexuality and travel becomes a metaphor for his inability to live within society’s rules.

With the presence of such characteristics, *In A Strange Room* finds its place in contemporary epistolary. Crucially we can also ask of it the same three questions: to whom, for whom and why does Damon write?

We begin our analysis by considering the gaze. For the gaze to exist there must be a third element. The gaze, as we know, is never dual:

[I]t is never a simple confrontation between a subject and an adversary. A third element is always involved (the King in The Purloined Letter...) that personifies the innocent ignorance of the big Other (the rules of the social game) from which we must hide our true designs (Zizek 2005, p. 72).

There is no third element in Galgut's first chapter. The action happens between Damon and Reiner, they are alone on the road and no-one else observes them. Thus, I would argue, Damon writes from a place where there are no rules. He and Reiner exist outside the gaze of the Big Other. The social game is different when you travel, he suggests – you have little information about the people you meet, and your life is pared back to the basics.

You need shelter, you need food, and your travelling companions take on a very special significance, none of these things we really reflect on in our normal lives (Koval 2011).

Likewise, the social isolation and alienation that Damon feels as a white gay South African male set him outside the social dynamic. Homosexuality still exists outside the bounds of 'normality'. The troubles of South Africa still exist outside the normal world order. It is not a question of the Big Other 'not seeing'. Rather, there is no Big Other. Because surely, if God did exist, he would intervene to put an end to the alienation and discrimination of homosexuals? And surely, if a fair and equitable world order existed, someone or something would step in to end the horrors of human suffering in Africa? No, Galgut seems to say, no-one is out there, no-one is watching. For if they were, how could this happen?

Similarly, in *The Lover*, the gaze is dual. There is only Damon and the man he is in love with, Jerome. Perhaps Christian, Jerome's French friend, could be this innocent third? Or Jerome's sister? Or his mother Catherine? If Catherine were to stand in opposition to a homosexual relationship between her son and an older man, her role could be that of the unseeing third. Or if Christian were Jerome's lover, he could be innocent and unaware of Jerome's unfolding love affair with Damon. But the narrative does not present us with such intrigues. Only once does Damon wonder:

[W]hat is your relationship with Christian, what bond has kept you going all the way from West Africa (Galgut 2010, p. 81).

The language barrier means the question is never asked, and the story does not advance this line. In fact, any possibility of a third is thwarted by the narrative. None of the other characters take their place as a third. Christian does not appear to have a sexual relationship with Jerome, Jerome's sister Alice is warm to Damon and

his mother Catherine is welcoming. Though there are others in the story of Damon and Jerome, there is no indication that they are watching or observing. And as readers, we are offered Damon's perspective only. This is made even more evident due to the oppressive narrative mode. Regardless of whether Galgut is writing in first, second or third person, we can never escape from Damon's head.

He is never alone with Jerome. Once or twice, when Christian has gone off to swim and Alice gets up to join him, it seems he and Jerome will be the only ones left there on the sand. But it doesn't happen. Christian appears at the last moment, coming up dripping and panting from the lake, throwing himself down on his towel. But if he's laying claim to the younger man he doesn't show it, in fact it's Christian who suggests...that he come along with them to Tanzania (Galgut 2010, p. 83).

The third novella, *The Guardian*, makes the most compelling reading. This is because, for the first time, we are offered the dialectic of the gaze. Damon is no longer an itinerant traveller. He is an established writer who travels to India to write. He stays in the same village, in the same room, in the same hotel. Each year, he meets the same people. Though there is still some fragility to his existence in India, he is anchored in a way that was neither possible nor appealing to his character in the previous novellas. Into this dynamic, he brings his friend Anna. Anna is the devious actor, Poe's Minister. She is mentally unstable, refuses to take her medication and indulges in alcohol and illicit drugs. Damon is the Queen in the scenario. He sees Anna's behaviour and her sexual

affairs but he cannot tell Anna's girlfriend back home. The girlfriend, then, is in the position of the King - naïve, innocent, trusting.

Unlike *Atonement* and *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, there is no trick in Galgut's storytelling. We know from the outset that Anna will spiral out of control. Even her death, when it comes, is no real surprise. Similarly, in the first two parts, we know that Damon's interest in Jerome will never come to anything and that his dangerous fascination with Reiner can never grow into love. The flat, fatalism of Galgut's writing style contributes. Galgut is not the detective-analyst here. Rather he is the sentencing judge. There is nothing to find out, it is already all there. It has already come to pass and Galgut's task is to lay it all out, bare.

In *The Guardian*, the first sentence foreshadows Anna's fall:

Even before their departure, when he goes to meet her flight from Cape Town, he knows he's in trouble (Galgut 2010, p. 127).

Despite this, Anna's actual death happens 'off-screen' and is reported with little fanfare:

The message comes just a few days later. Anna is dead. On the day after Jean's departure she took a massive overdose of pain-killers while she was alone in her apartment. Her sister became concerned when she didn't return phone calls and got a locksmith to open the door and found her lying on her

bed. There is more, but the words are blotted out by the fog that has filled the room, erasing time (Galgut 2010, p. 178).

Because there is no fantasy, there can be no blot. There is no hole, no lacuna that keeps us reading. Instead the horror of the Real is with us the whole way through. Thus, unlike the undead in *Atonement* and *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, Anna does not rise again. Her death by her own hand is well-planned and intended. She has planned her own funeral, has written notes to those she loves, and neither Damon nor her partner express any surprise that she has ultimately been successful. There is no undead gaze to rise up in the final pages. Rather, Anna is dead and buried.

It takes him a moment to understand that the news is irrevocable, it cannot be undone. Not now and not ever, because the dead do not return (Galgut 2010, p. 178).

There is no signifier and so the positions do not shift. We are given only the briefest postscript, when Damon visits Anna's girlfriend's house and sees her ashes. The scene in the end is comic, rather than horrifying:

He stares at the bag and pokes it with his finger. Shakes his head in amazement. It seems bizarre, to the point of bitter laughter, that a human being can be reduced to this (Galgut 2010, p. 179).

Without the blot, our spectatorship is not anticipated. The novel does not suture us in, such that we are caught looking through the keyhole. It does not address any challenging questions to its readers. It does not care what we think of homosexuality or human rights issues in South Africa. Occasionally we are addressed as fellow travellers – invited to consider the nature of travel, travel as a metaphor for real life, travel as an escape hatch into a more primordial existence. Yet we know that each of these journeys are already over before they have begun. Galgut does not invite us to join him on his journey, only to observe his internal musings from a distance.

This is the perverseness of *In A Strange Room*. There is nothing secret or covert in the story, everything is laid bare for us to see. This indeed was Galgut's purpose. As he told Ramona Koval, his intention was to "not hold back":

I had to face up to myself in a certain way early on in the writing of this book and say if I'm going to be telling these stories, there is no point in holding back from the truth, so don't spare anybody, including yourself, in the writing of the book. That was the basic rule I tried to follow (Koval 2011).

Zizek notes that pornography is the genre that "reveals all". *In A Strange Room* is not sexually explicit. But it does lay everything bare, including the excruciating desire and impotency that Damon feels. Like pornography, it does not offer us a position from which to 'look away'. In Lacanian theory, the gaze is always objective – the object of our gaze is in fact already gazing back at us. In pornography, the gaze is subjective – the gaze rests with us and we gaze at the image that reveals all. In other words, there is no blot, no mysterious point from which our gaze is sutured

in, from which our spectatorship is anticipated or from which it gazes back at us. As Zizek explains:

[T]he spectator himself...effectively occupies the position of the object. The real subjects are the actors on the screen, trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators, are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze (Zizek 1992b, p. 110).

Seething, subversive sexuality lies at the heart of *In A Strange Room*. Sexuality is present yet absent, and that is Galgut's brilliance. In laying everything bare, there is no need for fantasy. Also, it is through fantasy that we learn to desire and Damon's desires are not condoned by society. He offers only a single reading position – his own – dispelling any charm of romance. As Zizek notes, the paradox of pornography is that in showing all, it misses the opportunity to show the real intimacy of the relationship. Thus Damon chases each love interest across countries, across the world, each time laying himself bare and each time failing, only succeeding in compounding his loneliness, isolation and sense of alienation. Even in his platonic relationship with Anna, there is a sense of impotency. She is a woman who could be his wife, but he rejects her as he has rejected all women, and with it the normalcy and stability of marriage and a family.

What then of the narrator Damon? Is there an element of thirdness that can be identified in the gaze that exists between the younger traveller Damon and the later writing Damon? Again this gaze is dual. Galgut eschews the role of the Lacanian

psychoanalyst, in effect eschewing the intersubjectivity that Lacan seeks to explore in *The Purloined Letter*. His quest is for understanding of his own private truth, and he is not interested in being psychoanalysed. He does not want to undergo “the symbolic integration of our traumas, by way of narrating them to the analyst who epitomizes the big Other of intersubjectivity” (Žižek 1992a, p. 262). There is no Big Other and Damon/Galgut is ultimately uninterested in other people. He thus rejects the notion of an expert – a psychoanalyst or a detective – who will come in and cure him. His talking cure is a letter writing cure. His letter is written to himself alone.

Indeed this is ultimately the last bastion of the handwritten letter. No longer is letter writing a means for correspondence between two people. Rather, these days, it is experiencing a boom as a means of personal therapy – a letter to oneself or a letter to another person that is never sent. This is different from diary entries - still virtually to-the-moment writing. Instead the letter-as-therapy is written to oneself at a certain place in time, from a certain point in time – a one-off during a time of crisis or self-reflection. Dolan, Goren and Perlis describe this as a kind of “epistolary medicine”. In their study of cancer patients who wrote letters to medical students, they found letter-writing offered a pathway to self-discovery. As one patient wrote:

Writing to you has allowed me to reconnect with parts of myself that I had forgotten about or thought I had lost... (Dolan, Goren & Perlis 2009)

In A Strange Room is Galgut's own private personal letter-writing therapy. As the narrator shifts between third and first, and occasionally second person, the changing narrative mode turns the novel into a treatise on memory and self-identity. As one reviewer noted:

How quickly, (Galgut) seems to tell the reader, significant moments become distant memories, how quickly our actions become those of someone we barely remember or recognize. In the books we read and in the lives we lead, how easily I can become he, and he can become you (Langer 2010).

This style of self-analysis and internal reflection is another key characteristic of the epistolary mode. The non-fictional nature of *In A Strange Room* makes this all the more potent – much like Shklovsky's letters to Alya/Elsa in *Zoo*. To Ramona Koval, Galgut described the experience of writing as "confessional, an act of therapy and a self-examination".

[T]he real subject of this book for me is memory, and I've tried in the narrative to recreate the voice of memory or to convey something of a quality of the voice of memory, and the most distinctive thing about memory perhaps is the fact that one does switch between first and third person. If you're remembering events from some years back, some of those events are incredibly vivid to you, and you can be right back there in that moment, you are the first person reliving that instant again. And then with time intervening, very often you're looking at yourself as a stranger from outside, as a third person, as a he or a she doing something. So I tried to be true to that shift in

the writing of the book. The writing of the book was also an act of memory, so as the memory came to me and as I felt myself to be in or outside the memory, I tried to set it down that way (Koval 2011).

The exploration of memory and failed memory is underscored by Galgut's decision to give the central character his own name, Damon. From the first pages, we see the author and narrator as one person, though they do not always speak with the same voice. With his conspicuous shifts between "I" and "he", Galgut sees himself from differing points in time. Occasionally, it is "I" remembering a past event that happened to "me". At other times, writing in the third person, Galgut views Damon as a former self – distance, gone, almost an unknown. He encourages the reader too to see him from these various viewpoints. Each different position is dependent on time. The use of the "I" makes the memory seem sharper. The third person activates distance and attaches to older memories.

I wander around and come back, then wander again. A large part of travelling consists purely in waiting, with all the attendant ennui and depression. Memories come back of other places he has waited in, departure halls of airports, bus-stations, lonely kerbsides in the heat, and in all of them there is an identical strain of melancholy summed up in a few transitory details. A paper bag blowing in the wind. The mark of a dirty shoe on a tile. The irregular sputter of a fluorescent bulb. From this particular place he will retain the vision of a cracked brick wall growing hotter and hotter in the sun (Galgut 2010, p. 27).

Similarly, in this passage, the use of the possessive pronoun in the last sentence makes the memory crystallise.

*This isn't an answer to the question but he doesn't ask again, it's obvious that he is perturbed and somehow this has made him weak, he nods and changes the subject but in his mind he cannot let go of the lined exhausted face of the woman in the sauna, the way she held **onto our arms** (Galgut 2010, pp. 30, emphasis added).*

The use of the first person changes in each story. It is used sparingly in *The Follower*, with the emphasis on the third person. This story is the earliest of the three, and it is from that person that Galgut seems to feel most distant. He flags himself as an unreliable narrator, blaming the gaps on his memory:

The figure is a man about his own age, dressed entirely in black. Black pants and shirt, black boots. Even his rucksack is black. What the first man is wearing I don't know, I forget (Galgut 2010, p. 3).

Maybe we should go there.

Maybe we should.

These might not be the words they use, but the decision is as light and unconsidered as this, one moment they don't know where they are going, the next they are off to Lesotho (Galgut 2010, p. 21).

The Guardian is the most recent journey of the three, and the first person is used more liberally. The effect is less jarring and more compelling. The first person allows us more access to the character Damon – we are not kept at arms-length as we are in the earlier stories, by the forced use of the third person. Instead, the occasional use of the third person has the effect of slowing down the narration, allowing us and the narrator the opportunity to reflect. In the following scene, Damon is talking to his friend Anna's girlfriend, in the days after Anna has attempted suicide while they are on holidays in India. His first person account of the telephone conversation is stark, urgent and emotional. In the next paragraph, he chooses the third person to recall, in more forensic and impartial detail, the scene in which he reads Anna's diary. The pace changes with the shift to the third person.

Now I spill out all the details, everything that's been kept under wraps. We seem to have arrived at some confessional core, where there are no more secrets, no more concealments. It may be in this conversation, or perhaps in another soon afterwards that I walk with the phone into the middle of an empty field next to the hotel and bawl. I'm sorry, I tell her, I'm sorry I said I could look after her, I had no idea what I was taking on.

He returns to Anna's journal and spends hours reading it, from the very first page. He feels no compunction about delving into her private thoughts and feelings, if she has brought us to this moment of truth, well, let it embrace her too. What he finds there is sad and shocking. It's as he realized in the end, her

act was not a momentary impulse, on the contrary, it was a goal she yearned for from the outset, one she worked herself up to by degrees (Galgut 2010, p. 159).

The trial motif is strong in the novel. Like McEwan and Shriver, Galgut's writing eschews the "to-the-moment" writing and reflects on a time already past. The writer Damon stands apart from his young, naïve self, presenting the evidence and giving his verdict. But unlike the prescient writing in *Atonement* which gives the impression of a trial unfolding, Galgut's novel has the feel of a sentencing. The book, as critic Adam Langer notes, is fatalistic and sombre:

Dialogue is presented without quotation marks, always filtered through Damon's interpretations. Question marks do not appear at the ends of questions, assuring both a flatness of delivery and certainty of tone (Langer 2010).

This at first seems a stylistic choice. But with closer consideration, it gives each story a sense of inevitability. Unlike *Atonement*, we have little opportunity to consider Damon's guilt or innocence. This is because, as Langer suggests, Galgut "never allows the reader to escape Damon's perspective" (Langer 2010).

Longing and desire, as well as exile and loneliness, are recurring themes in *In A Strange Room*. Just like Shklovsky's *Zoo*, the book is a story not about love. Not

only that, but it explores the brutal sexuality of gay men without ever describing it. In *The Follower*, Reiner holds a strange fascination for Damon. He does not fall in love with him but several times finds himself “in some way offering himself” (p. 12). Homosexuality is never made explicit, yet Reiner comes across as strong and menacing. We are told only that:

[N]either makes the move, one is too scared and the other is too proud...the moment is past (p. 14).

In *Atonement*, love is thwarted by class. In *A Strange Room* presents homosexuality as the love that dare not speak its name. The love between Damon and Jerome is similarly unconsummated, futile. Galgut himself describes this affair as “a prolonged moment of love in my life which hadn’t been the case for quite a long time” (Armistead 2010). But in the novel, Jerome speaks no English, Damon speaks no French. They can share only a few words and are never intimate.

Impotency is mirrored in the final story, *The Guardian*. Damon and his lesbian friend Anna are mistaken for lovers. She is in a committed lesbian relationship but she has an affair with a Frenchman in India. She also suggests sex with Damon, who declines. Lack of physical intimacy is repeated in each relationship, in each novella. It is the thing that Damon wants, but fails time and time again to find.

As we have seen, *In A Strange Room* is transgressive in its writing style. In this way, the novel highlights the futility of letter writing. Instead of the romantic notion that letters are able to stand in for the absent lover, Damon’s correspondence is

purposely disharmonious. While Reiner's letters are scant on facts, Damon writes "too freely" (p. 18). When they see each other later after a period of correspondence, the meeting is awkward and stiff. Their letters have created a relationship that does not exist in real life:

They are unsure of how to greet each other. He opens his arms and the other man accepts the embrace. But not entirely (Galgut 2010, p. 19).

On Jerome's death we encounter the letter motif again. Damon's own letter to Jerome is returned to him, along with a "stiff single card" with the signature of "a stranger" that tells him of Jerome's death. The details of the accident are scant, and a stranger has been asked to convey the message by Jerome's mother. Even in death, the letter does not build real relationships. The letter, sent by a stranger, seems to put paid to any possible future relationship with Jerome's family.

Ultimately however *The Lover* can be read as a love letter to Jerome. Damon/Galgut writes the things that he was not able to say, imagines future encounters he wishes he could have had, and chastises himself for failing. His words are those of a man who is about to be sent away:

Jerome, if I can't make you live in words, if you are only the dim evocation of a face under a fringe of hair...it's not because I don't remember, no, the opposite is true, you are remembered in me as an endless stirring and turning. But it's for this precisely that you must forgive me, because in every story of

myself alone, it's all I know, and for this reason I have always failed in every love, which is to say at the heart of my life (Galgut 2010, p. 106).

Whether *In A Strange Room* succeeds as a novel is a moot point. Galgut himself has acknowledged that he does not intend to write again in this kind of experimental style (Koval 2011). Yet the work was shortlisted for a Man Booker Prize – surely an indication of the strength of its construction. I would argue that the absence of the gaze structure is a significant reason why the book makes for difficult reading. And indeed the book does not have the seductive art that is recognisable in *Atonement* or *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, thanks to the presence in those novels of the blot and the gaze.

However, as an example of the evolution of epistolary literature, *In A Strange Room* is a profound and moving piece of work. One feels very strongly the presence of Viktor Shklovsky – as though in his loneliness Galgut is able to dialogue with another lonely man. As Kauffman has suggested, epistolary literature dialogues with itself - *Shklovsky writes to Rousseau, Nabokov to Poe, Barthes to Werther...*(1992) – and Galgut draws heavily on the same tradition that inspired Shklovsky, Nabokov, Bellow, Atwood, McEwan and Shriver. The epistolary tradition is in good hands.

7. Discussion and conclusion: The love letter in literature in the 21st century

This exegesis shows how contemporary epistolary literature continues to bear the hallmarks of the epistolary tradition. And it has explored how the concept of the Lacanian gaze can be used to enliven and arouse the voyeuristic unveiling of secrets that has been exploited in epistolary literature since long before Samuel Richardson's times. But how will the epistolary genre continue in a society in which the hand-written letter is long since dead? And at a time when technological change is advancing at a rapid pace?

The challenge for academics researching in the area of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is to keep abreast of the Zeitgeist. By way of example, when I began this research in 2009, the micro blogging site Twitter was just three years old. That year, the site surged in popularity, moving from 22nd place on the list of highest ranking social networking sites to third highest, behind Facebook and MySpace²⁴. It has long since surged past MySpace, with a growth trajectory that has been fast and unpredictable. In February 2010, Twitter users sent 50 million tweets a day. By March 2011, it was 140 million tweets daily²⁵. And by March 2012, it was 340 million tweets daily. Twitter's influence beyond social networking is profound. It has been described by Silicon Valley venture capitalist Bill Gurley as a "one-to-many information broadcast network"²⁶. Broadcast media executives are grappling to understand what this means for the traditional "one-to-many" broadcast model.

²⁴ <http://blog.compete.com/2009/02/09/facebook-myspace-twitter-social-network> (accessed June 14, 2012). Twitter is now second only to Facebook <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites> (accessed June 14, 2012).

²⁵ <http://blog.twitter.com/2011/03/numbers.html> (accessed June 14, 2012)

²⁶ <http://abovethecrowd.com/2011/11/15/you-dont-have-to-tweet-to-twitter/> (accessed June 14, 2012)

Meanwhile media companies and publishers across all platforms are struggling to withstand the new “many to many” communication paradigm offered by Web 2.0²⁷.

Change is happening at lightning speed. In 2008, I was surprised to hear cultural theorist Dominic Pettman say “anything with vowels is considered too gushy and gauche” (O'Dwyer 2008). His view was that Generation Y was abandoning email in favour of blogs, MySpace and instant messaging. Now, in 2014, his words seem prophetic – except that it's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In 2010, Mashable reported that text messaging had surpassed email, phone and face-to-face communication for 12- to 17-year-olds²⁸. For the rest of us, email has become slow and cumbersome. In the main, it is a work tool – a platform for communicating between professional contacts. Even though smartphones allow access around the clock, email seems more formal, less personal. It remains a useful way of distributing and receiving information – both professional and personal. Yet for short sharp communications – instant, abbreviated messages sent between friends and intimates – the text message is the medium of choice.

For how long and in what ways this trend will play out is unclear. In 2009, 5 trillion text messages were being sent annually worldwide²⁹. But recent data shows the text message is in decline, in favour of free social messaging apps³⁰. Smartphones have

²⁷ Twitter has become an extraordinary communication tool. A new kind of letter, as it were. It offers a new “one-to-many” communication style. It is an instant news feed to rival traditional commercial news publishers such as AAP, AFP and Reuters, and wire services have updated editorial policies to include the extraordinary directive, “Don’t scoop the wire”. Yet increasingly news breaks on Twitter, most significantly the death of Osama bin Laden. Twitter has been used to disseminate news and mobilise support in times of natural disasters (Hjorth & Kim 2011). It has also been used as a call-to-arms, most profoundly in the 2011 Egyptian revolution (El Hamamsy 2011).

²⁸ <http://mashable.com/2010/08/17/text-messaging-infographic/> (Accessed June 18, 2012)

²⁹ <http://mashable.com/2010/08/17/text-messaging-infographic/> (Accessed June 18, 2012)

³⁰ <http://mashable.com/2012/02/22/sms-apps/> (Accessed June 18, 2012)

been around since the early 2000s but it was not until Apple launched the iPhone in 2008 that communication changed again, dramatically. The iPhone and its competitors made texting easier – larger screens, tapping rather than pressing, autocorrect and so on. But it has also opened the door for sites like Facebook, Twitter and Skype to provide free instant messaging services. Apple's new iMessage adds to the mix. It's free between iPhone users and chats can be synced, allowing users to access their messages on all different devices.

There is no stopping the mobile juggernaut. Particularly in Australia, the take-up has been phenomenal. A 2011 report found that Australia has the second highest smartphone penetration in the world behind Singapore, at 37 per cent³¹. By May 2012 that had climbed again, with one in two Australians now owning a smartphone³². As one commentator noted, the mobile phone has become the “digital Swiss Army knife” – an all-purpose communication tool. According to McKinsey analyst Ewan Duncan:

When they communicate, they are likely to do it through text or video, not voice. They think email is slow and dumb. They don't sit and watch TV -- they snack on video as they are doing other things (Mahoney 2012).

³¹ <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/mobiles/australias-white-hot-smartphone-revolution-20110908-1jz3k.html#ixzz1y7UbrEcr> (Accessed June 18, 2012)

³² <http://www.bandt.com.au/news/digital/smartphone-penetration-booms-down-under> (accessed June 18, 2012)

What all this amounts to is that our most intimate sentiments are still conveyed by the written word. But we don't write letters. We don't even write emails. Nonetheless the digital revolution has brought a textualisation of our society that has not been seen since the advent of the telegraph.

All this has relevance for the future of the epistolary tradition. Haggis and Holmes pose the question: "Is an SMS text...a new form of letter writing?" Their research followed the communication patterns of couples in long distance relationships and found that couples connect daily, or every few days, using email, text and online social networking.

Haggis and Holmes describe these written communications as "epistles". But they also note their "briefer, pared-down nature". Texts are no more than "the equivalent of a bare line of type". And though couples manage to "connect more often", they do so with much "less depth".

There is less emotional investment in each of these many short contacts, compared with the longer, less frequent letters of the past (Haggis & Holmes 2011, p. 174).

Clearly, texts and emails and online chat are like the love letters of the past. They allow parted couples to maintain intimacy, build connectedness and create the self through writing (Haggis & Holmes 2011). Where they differ markedly is in their ability to convey emotion and passion. Haggis and Holmes observe that lovers today exchange banalities like "where r u" and "what u doin?" rather than writing

with the kind of emotional intensity and rich descriptive writing that were the hallmarks of written communication in the postal age. What they also observe is the constant need to keep in touch – to reassure an intimate partner of where you are and what you are doing. This, they say, exposes the “fragility of social connectedness”. As a result language is impacted – both in brevity of text and brevity of word. But also because of the merging of public and private space.

There is an awareness of the possibility of “leakage” – the work email becoming entangled with the intimate; the language of love mixing uneasily with the language of play... (Haggis & Holmes 2011, p. 182)

There is no doubt the digital landscape is changing the way we use language. Not just a new vocabulary, but a transmutation of the way we communicate. And yet, research shows that it has always been thus.

US linguist Naomi Baron recounts the remarkable change of fortune that technology brought to the humble “Hello”. When Alexander Graham Bell invented the phone, he suggested the word “Ahoy” be used to begin a conversation. (Ahoy is a word used to hail ships). His rival, Thomas Alva Edison, experimented with a hunting call, shouting “Halloo!” into the mouthpiece of his phonograph. He later suggested that “Hello” be used in greeting.

But there was a problem. At the time “Hello” (and its variants) were viewed as vulgar language. Etiquette books inveighed against the use of Edison’s greeting. Bell’s company, AT&T, fought to suppress the use of “Hello”, and

as recently as the 1940s, social arbiter Millicent Fenwick deemed the word acceptable only under limited circumstances. But such prescriptive efforts were of little avail. "Hello" had moved into common usage by the turn of the twentieth century (Baron 2002, p. 409).

Language has changed even in the past 20 years. Emails were initially very short, due to expensive internet access and very small screens. As access became cheaper and more freely available, emails lengthened.

You could write at your leisure, compose with ease...and send off your message only when you were ready. Multi-page emails became common (Baron 2002, p. 410).

Now, instant messaging and the introduction of hand-held devices (small screens, no keyboards) have changed written style all over again. We abbreviate some words, eliminate others and write in a clipped, fragmented back-and-forth style that is more like dialogue than letter writing. In fact Baron suggests that today's shortened email style is analogous to telegraphic language. Telegrams were kept short due to cost and because long messages caused delays in transmission.

Transmission bottlenecks were created at telegraph offices when swarms of reporters wanted to file stories, via the telegraph, at the same time. These communication log jams were eventually cleared by the creation of the Associated Press (which made it possible to simultaneously file one story with

hundreds of newspapers) as well as a change in journalistic writing style from flowery to succinct (Baron 2002, p. 410).

Thus, changes to technology brought changes to the written word more than a century ago. And not just among journalists but among novel writers too. As early as 1848 an anonymous commentator suggested that the telegraph would force succinctness in English prose style:

*When a half column or more of every paper in the Union is filled with Telegraphic despatches (sic); when these reports form a large part of the daily reading of thousands; when correspondence is hourly prepared and revised, throughout the whole extent of the United States, with a view to the telegraphic transmission, is it too much to expect that this invention will have an influence upon American literature and that that influence will be marked and permanent? ("Influence of the Telegraph" *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 1848, p 411-412, cited in Baron 2002)*

By the turn of the century, reporters were using shorter words and simpler sentence structure to avoid errors in transmission. Newspaper editor Robert Lincoln O'Brien observed that writing had lost the "graceful elision of one sentence into the next" and he complained that "[w]here each sentence stands out as distinct as a brick the literary passage will have the aspect of a brick wall".

If the typewriter and the telegraph, for mechanical reasons purely, are encouraging certain words, certain arrangements of phrases, and a different dependence on punctuation, such an influence is a stone whose ripples, once set in motion, wash every shore of the sea of literature (The Atlantic Monthly, 1904, cited in Baron 2002).

He was not far wrong. It was none other than Hemingway who turned prose style on its head. His short simple sentences reflected his time as a war correspondent, when his reports were sent via the telegraph (Baron 2002, p. 411).

What relevance does this have for contemporary epistolary literature? Baron concludes that email and online writing “may well influence” what amounts to good writing on the page. She writes that excitement over new technology may outweigh concerns about “precision and richness of linguistic expression”. However she goes no further in her analysis, noting only that it will be “interesting” to see how it “plays out” (2002, p. 412)³³.

Of interest is that writers, authors and novelists have begun considering how digital technologies might change the way they do their job. In an insightful essay in *The Guardian*, writer Ewan Morrison contends that “multi-screening” – opening various digital screens at the same time – must force novelists to rethink the novelistic form (Morrison 2012). He notes that a new genre of books are mixing historical fact with fictionalised first-person accounts and embedded video. He points to Dave Eggers’

³³ Baron’s more recent work has focused on the impact of digital technology on linguistics more broadly – see for example *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (2008); and “Text Messaging and IM: Linguistic Comparisons of American College Data” in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* (Ling & Baron 2007).

Zeitoun (2009) – a work of creative non-fiction about one man’s experience of Hurricane Katrina. Even earlier is Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) which he describes as “a perfect fusion of fact and fiction...breaking up the novel into mixed genre sections – anecdote – history – philosophical essay”. Whether James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* is a novel is an obsolete question, Morrison argues. And he points to David Shields’ 2010 book *Reality Hunger*, which called for a new kind of writing which allows the writer to play reporter, fantasist, autobiographer, essayist and critic.

As a writer with a reputation for confounding genre, David Shields believes that what we read and how we write is about to change. In 50 years no-one will be reading Ian McEwan or Jonathan Franzen. In an interview with literature blog HTMLGIANT, he noted that there can be no Tolstoy of the digital age:

In 20 years...art will have progressed so far beyond these extraordinarily antediluvian works that they will be viewed as escapees from 1890³⁴.

In *Reality Hunger*, he goes further, suggesting that what we want is reality not realism:

[W]e yearn for the ‘real’, semblances of the real. We want to pose something non-fictional against all the fabrication – autobiographical frissons or framed or filmed or caught moments that, in their seeming unrehearsedness, possess at least the possibility of breaking through the clutter. More invention, more fabrication aren't going to do this (Shields 2010, p. 79).

³⁴ <http://htmlgiant.com/author-spotlight/the-david-shields-interview-paperback-edition/> (accessed June 19, 2012)

What gives readers of Morrison's essay pause for thought is his reference to Walter Benjamin. He cites Benjamin's seminal essay *The Storyteller* in which Benjamin argued that capitalism threatened the novel. Wrote Benjamin:

*[Capitalism] confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information*³⁵.

Has it not, then, always been thus?

Nonetheless literary sales figures alone should make us take stock. Morrison urges us to *rethink how we write* in an age when *how we read* is undergoing a massive transformation.

We must catch ourselves in the act of thinking that the novel is somehow timeless and eternal, a Platonic form. Its history in fact only extends back a couple of hundred years. For works of writing to reflect this world, they also have to enter into the language and forms of our time, otherwise we end up with confused, over-stuffed, compromised books that use an old form to try to talk about a new time. If it is to be relevant at all, the novel must break into new hybrids and leave the 19th-century segregation of fact, fiction, memoir and essay behind (Morrison 2012).

Morrison is not alone. In a special report on the e-reader for *The Wall Street Journal*, author and media theorist Steven Johnson argues that to date the novel has remained "walled off from the world of hypertext" – "a kind of game preserve for

³⁵ www.slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf (accessed July 4, 2012)

the endangered species of linear, deep-focus reading” (Johnson 2009). Already, e-readers with internet browsers are changing that. As he predicted:

We all may read books the way we increasingly read magazines and newspapers: a little bit here, a little bit there (Johnson 2009).

There is no point moaning about the death of the novel. But what we must observe are the changes that are happening. US literary magazine *n + 1* warns the internet is bringing about a “cheapening of language”:

[A] coercive blogginess, a paradoxically de rigueur relaxation, menaces a whole generation’s prose (no, yeah, ours too). You won’t sound contemporary and for real unless it sounds like you’re writing off the top of your head. But all contemporary publications tend toward the condition of blogs, and soon, if not yet already, it will seem pretentious, elitist, and old-fashioned to write anything, anywhere, with patience and care ('Please RT' 2012).

Technology is changing the written word. Publisher Jason Epstein describes the change as happening at a “magnitude greater than the momentous evolution” that occurred when Gutenberg invented mechanical moveable type. Epstein recently described Gutenberg’s invention as “the sine qua non for the rebirth of the West”. And like Gutenberg, we can have no clue where the digital age will lead us:

It is futile at this early stage, however, to anticipate the new publishing landscape in detail. Publishers, writers and readers adapt accordingly. Timing will be apparent only in retrospect (Epstein 2010).

At present, there is much scholarship around new media art forms. This somewhat frightening and hyper-contemporary interdisciplinary ‘lit-space’ is variously called transmedia, digital writing or electronic literature. Amanda Starling Gould describes electronic literature as “born-digital literary art that exploits, as its muse and medium, the transmedia possibilities of the digital” (Gould 2012). The Electronic Literature Organization includes in its own definition hypertext literature, kinetic Flash poetry, hybrid literary/art installations, interactive fiction, computer-generated novels and novels in email, SMS or blog post form.

Perhaps the most high-profile of these mash-ups is Mark Amerika’s *remixthebook* – a print/digital amalgam of performance art, fiction and critical literary theory that continues as an interactive online arts hub³⁶. Another innovator is writer Kate Pullinger, whose networked novel *Flight Paths* is an online publishing project to which anyone can contribute³⁷. Pullinger has also published the digital novel *Inanimate Alice* – a blend of text, sound and animation developed in conjunction with a digital artist and an art director³⁸. Another intriguing example is “Love, Letty X” – an online interactive creative arts project in which Letty McHugh receives online questions and posts typewritten letters in return³⁹.

E-lit scholars suggest that digital collaborations are both inevitable and desirable. Anna Gibbs notes many young writers want to write for multimedia platforms, while established artists are already working across disciplines. The intense intermingling, she argues, is reminiscent of the birth of modernism.

³⁶ <http://www.remixthebook.com/> (accessed July 5, 2012)

³⁷ <http://flightpaths.net/> (accessed July 5, 2012)

³⁸ <http://www.inanimatealice.com/index.html> (accessed July 5, 2012)

³⁹ In July 2012, McHugh blogged live at the MIX Transmedia Writing and Digital Creativity conference at Bath Spa University. See <http://loveletty.tumblr.com/> (Accessed July 5, 2012)

The emphasis on syncretism and collaboration, the renewed interest in generative and procedural possibilities revived in algorithmic work, the morphing of narrative into new forms, the emphasis on synthetic approaches to the arts and the sheer rapidity of innovation are all reminiscent of that period (Gibbs 2011).

Not that scholars are burning their books. As Electronic Literature Organization founder Joseph Tabbi argues, we should not forget the power of the written word amid the exciting possibilities of digital. Tabbi suggests we explore the future cautiously, with reference to the past:

...those places where technology affects our own practice as writers, and [seek] alternatives not in the future imagined by popular culture, but in the accomplished written artifacts that have been, traditionally, the purview of literary scholarship (Tabbi 2008).

Writing teacher Craig Stroupe is one such academic who looks to the past and the future. In acknowledging that social change and technological invention are the seeds of new literary creation, Stroupe looks no further than Samuel Richardson. Richardson, he argues, “appropriated” the new cultural practice of letter writing and made it a platform for his own literary ambitions:

This process of new narrative genres bubbling up from the practical and economic information technologies of their times – in this case, the technologies of letter writing and the postal system – parallels the same process...that has been generated by...Web culture (Stroupe 2007, p. 435).

Yet dreaming up images of the future is dangerous. Email novels have come and gone⁴⁰. Fortunately too the cell phone novel. And, as Stroupe discovered when he asked his “new media” writing students back in 2007 to write a hypertext novel (then all the rage among new media scholars), anything we might predict will seem like space-age science fiction. While Stroupe thought he was exploring the future of writing, his students disagreed:

Many of them seemed to consider it (the hypertext novel) a bygone future, like the clunky, twenty-third century of Captain Kirk’s 1960s-era Star Trek. The politely skeptical response of my students, who had grown up with network culture, suggested there is more to creating successful online corollaries to print genres than simply appropriating digital space for writing’s business as usual (Stroupe 2007, p. 422).

And Stroupe warns that we impose a “print-based sense of shape” onto the “screen-based boundless space of the information network” at our peril:

We cannot claim to know...the future of digital writing, of its possible continuities within storytelling, or of the odd success of it in relation to the flows of capitalized information on the global network (Stroupe 2007, p. 439).

⁴⁰ I am not alone in my critique of the email novel. Critic David Galef said the “taut lyricism” of Jeanette Winterson’s early novels had “gone slack” in her experimental email novel *The Powerbook* and that “the jump-cuts don’t work”. He advised her to “stop e-mailing and get back to work” (Galef 2000). His colleague Richard Eder was more enthusiastic about Sylvia Brownrigg’s email novel *The Metaphysical Touch*, describing it as provocative and adventurous in its attempt to “keep time for a ticking world”. Yet an epistolary weakness remained: the characters were less real when they were not thinking (or writing). “To put it differently, their thoughts about themselves are more vital than they are” (Eder 1999).

It is impossible to predict, in other words, what will happen in the future. We are at a juncture comparable only to the invention of the printing press, and like Gutenberg, we can have no inkling of how the digital revolution will play out.

Why then a study of epistolary literature? It would be ludicrous to suggest that epistolary novels will ever bloom again. And indeed attempts to reinvigorate the form with email correspondence have largely failed. And yet, as I have shown, contemporary literature still draws on the genre, mining its themes and motifs to create works that are the shining lights of their time. I have also shown how modern writers who draw on the epistolary tradition are drawing too on the dialectic of the gaze, studding their work with secrets and intrigue, and at the same time creating texts of jouissance. We have also seen in the case of *In A Strange Room* how the creative decision to abandon the gaze structure impacts on the readability of the work. That book remains a text of jouissance but, in its first two parts at least, the reader finds it tough going. There is nothing secret, nothing remains hidden, no blot which fascinates our eye, that keeps pushing and pulling us through to the end. The most successful part of the book is its third part – where the three-way structure of the gaze is reintroduced. Though, as we have seen, at no point is the reader's spectatorship anticipated and ultimately this is a failure of construction.

I make this point because a writer's task is to enter a dialogue with the reader. To teach, touch, enliven, enlighten, explain and entertain; to burrow deep into our understanding of ourselves and us give an alternative view of who we are. The gaze

structure within epistolary allows writers to do this. And by cleverly concealing the blot in the story, the writer can keep us deceived until the very end. Not until the last moment is the truth revealed, when we are forced to look at our own selves and are fundamentally challenged: is this really what you want to see?

To hone our skills, writers look to the past. How has it been done before? What worked? What didn't? How did the literature of the past fail and where did it sparkle, with insight, wit and vigour? This was Jane Austen's aim when she read Samuel Richardson. That has been the purpose of this thesis too. Without *Clarissa*, there would have been no *Sense and Sensibility*. Without *The Go-Between*, there would have been no *Atonement* (Ingersoll 2004). Without *Zoo*, there would have been no *In A Strange Room*. And without modern epistolary classics like *The Color Purple*, there would have been no evolution to *We Need To Talk About Kevin*.

In eschewing Richardson's writing "to the moment", contemporary epistolary practitioners have nonetheless kept the genre alive. Sure, critics will always ask, "but when did she find time to write?" And, "how did she learn to write so well?" But these are small matters. Novelists invent literary devices and readers respond by suspending disbelief. Epistolary correspondents easily become writers – Briony is a novelist, Eva is a travel book writer, Damon Galgut is a writer for a living. All of us, even those who do not write for a living, at times take up the pen (or the typewriter or the tape recorder) to find freedom, understanding and release – *Herzog*, Leo Colston in *The Go-Between*, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The epistolary genre stays alive because it contributes something to contemporary literature. Absence, exile, loneliness and grief are universal themes, and they are perhaps most movingly explored by someone who remains when the lover has left. Self-reflection too is the human condition. We take up the pen to rake over old relationships, subject ourselves to trial and sentencing, and attempt to rewrite (sometimes literally) the wrongs of the past. Inherent in this too is the transgressive nature of epistolary. Writers challenge the status quo. Letter writing provides defined means, whether it's to your lover, your reader or your nation.

The dialectic of the gaze informs contemporary epistolary. The gaze structure illuminates what draws writers to it – a secret revealed, a letter intercepted, a confession overheard, an illicit scene witnessed. Of course the intrigues of the gaze can be explored without letters. But in literature, the letter creates an extra dimension – an inherent intimacy that need not be expressed, an inherent privacy that cannot be challenged (but will be), a passport to the soul that is quite unlike anything else.

A letter is still a passport to the soul. It can be words on a page, type in an email, or a few quick words flung together in a text. As long as there is writing, people will write letters. And the writer is right to mine them.

Production Note:

Chapter 8. Reflection: *In My Grandfather's House, p. 191 - 284 have been removed and is currently under consideration for publication as a memoir.*
16th September 2014

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