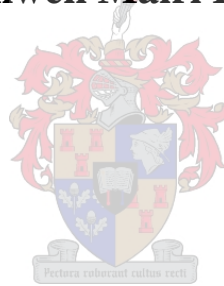


Trauma, Healing, Mourning and Narrative Voice in the Epistolary Mode

Bronwen Mairi Louw



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Supervisor: Dr. Jeanne Ellis

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Declaration

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Mae fy ngwaith yn cael ei gwblhau. Mae'r freuddwyd o dir fy mam yn amdani disgwyl.

Abstract:

The epistolary mode in fiction has long been associated with the expression of trauma experienced by women who are confined to a private, domestic and interior space. However, this mode also, paradoxically, opens up this space because the sending of a letter to an addressee invites the letter's fictional recipient to act as witness to the letter writer's account of her painful experiences. This thesis will, firstly, provide a brief historical overview of the development of epistolary fiction and will then set out to examine how epistolary narratives position the external reader in relation to the private exchange between narrator and trusted confidant. This voyeuristic position influences the way in which the text will be read regardless of the historical context in which the text is written. The period on which this thesis focuses is the 1980s to the turn of the millennium during which feminist ideals spread and found reflection in literature. This study analyses how Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) appropriated the epistolary mode to reveal and critique the silencing mechanisms suppressing its female narrators who write from within societies where multiple forms of marginalisation continue to constrain women and limit their engagement with the public sphere. Although the narrative voices of the two novels differ, both narrators use their letters to work through their experiences of trauma and heal through the process of sharing their recollections with another. In Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) no such resolution is possible for its narrator writes to her husband who has been killed by their son. This thesis will demonstrate that Shriver's novel, while sharing many of the features of the epistolary mode, unsettles the certainties that underpin the reader's associations with the mode. Whereas Bâ's and Walker's novels affirm the importance of motherhood, female connections and self-determination for women, Shriver presents us with a pessimistic text with an ambivalent, unreliable narrative voice which calls these affirmations into question. Her novel uses the epistolary mode to show that motherhood is embedded in socio-political issues that continue to constrain women. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* inflects motherhood with the prominent debate about school shootings and its attendant culpabilities, as well as the narrator's struggle with constructions of nationality, belonging and identity. This study will show that, as such, this text demonstrates a shift in how the epistolary mode is used. Its prior associations with healing from trauma through corresponding with an empathetic witness have made way for irremediable mourning and absolute isolation. The epistolary mode in this novel is used to articulate alienation from the historical precedents set by the mode itself.

Abstrak:

In fiksie hou die epistolêre modus lank reeds verband met die uitdrukking van trauma soos ervaar deur vroue wat tot 'n private, huishoudelike of interne ruimte beperk word. Hierdie modus bied egter ook 'n paradoksale oopstel van hierdie ruimte, want met die stuur van 'n brief aan iemand word die brief se fiktiewe ontvanger uitgenooi om as getuie van die briefskrywer se weergawe van haar pynvolle ervarings op te tree. Hierdie tesis sal eerstens 'n kort, historiese oorsig van die ontwikkeling van epistolêre fiksie bied en sal dan ondersoek instel na die wyse waarop epistolêre narratiewe die eksterne leser ten opsigte van die private briefwisseling tussen verteller en vertroueling posisioneer. Hierdie voyeuristiese posisie beïnvloed die wyse waarop die teks gelees sal word, ongeag die historiese konteks waarbinne die teks geskryf word. Die tydperk waarop die klem in hierdie tesis val, strek vanaf die 1980's tot die millenniumwending, waartydens feministiese ideale wyd versprei en neerslag in letterkunde gevind het. Hierdie studie ontleed hoe Mariama Bâ se *So Long a Letter* (1981) en Alice Walker se *The Color Purple* (1983) hulleself die epistolêre modus toe-eien om die stilmaakmeganismes wat vroue-vertellers onderdruk (diegene wat vanuit samelewings skryf waar veelvuldige vorme van marginalisering voortdurend vroue aan bande lê en hulle omgang in die openbare sfeer beperk), bloot te lê en te kritiseer. Al verskil die narratiewe stemme van die twee romans, gebruik beide vertellers hulle briewe om deur hulle traumatiese ervarings te werk en genesing te vind in die proses van herinneringe met iemand anders deel. In Lionel Shriver se *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) is sodanige berusting onmoontlik, want die verteller skryf aan haar man wat deur haar seun om die lewe gebring is. Hierdie tesis sal aantoon dat Shriver se roman, hoewel dit oor baie van die kenmerke van die epistolêre modus beskik, die sekerhede wat die leser met die modus assosieer, ontwig. Terwyl Bâ en Walker se romans die belangrikheid van moederskap, vroulike verbintenisse en selfbeskikking vir vrouens beaam, bied Shriver aan ons 'n pessimistiese teks met 'n ambivalente, onbetroubare vertelstem wat hierdie bevestigings bevraagteken. Haar roman gebruik die epistolêre modus om te wys daarop dat moederskap in sosiopolitiese kwessies wat voortdurend vroue inperk, veranker is. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* vervleg moederskap met die prominente debat oor skoolslagtings en gepaardgaande toerekeningsvatbaarhede, asook met die verteller se worsteling met konstruksie soos nasionaliteit, tuishoort en identiteit. Hierdie studie sal aantoon dat dié teks as sodanig op 'n verskuiwing in die wyse waarop die epistolêre modus gebruik word, dui. Vorige verbande met genesing van trauma deur briefwisseling met 'n invoelende getuie, moet opsy staan vir onherstelbare rou en volslae afsondering. Die epistolêre modus word in hierdie roman gebruik om aan vervreemding van die historiese presedente inherent aan die modus self, uiting te gee.

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Chapter 1

Introduction:

The Epistolary Mode: A History of Paradoxes

Although twenty-first century correspondence culture occurs primarily via electronic media and tends to eschew long epistles in favour of short messages, there is no denying the power of constant and immediate connection through the written word. This connection is a paradoxical one since we often use these letters in miniature to circumvent physical proximity whilst creating the illusion of intimacy with our addressee. A number of such contradictions can be found throughout the long history of letters, and these are also seen in epistolary fictions which mimic the way in which letters function in real life. In these letter fictions, however, there is the added dimension of the external reader who paradoxically immerses him-/herself as a voyeuristic outsider in the intimate space of a correspondence between the letter-writing narrator and his/her addressee (who is the internal reader of the letter). Since the narrator almost invariably uses his/her letter to express an interiority, epistolary novels allow the author to create a confessional voice that speaks of private concerns. While this may also be true of other forms of life writing like diaries and journals, and conventional first-person narrators, the fact that letters are written to a characterised recipient alters the way in which epistolary novels are read and interpreted. In addition, by sharing intimate secrets (often involving trauma) with his/her addressee, the narrator invites him/her to act as witness and thus opens up the space of the private realm so that there is no longer a clear delineation between private and public. This sharing through writing an epistle may also have a healing function for the narrator, even while the inscribing of painful memories may be re-traumatising. Although not all letters are about trauma, they all demonstrate the need of the narrator to be heard, a need often created by the physical absence of the addressee. In writing to this absent internal reader, the narrator conjures up his/her presence which influences both what he/she writes about as well as how he/she expresses him-/herself. The above-mentioned paradoxes inherent in the letter mode allow the author to use these contradictions as part of his/her writing strategy, and the document of the letter, the narrator and the addressee can thus all be viewed as conceits created to serve a particular function.

One such function is the portrayal of the female voice. Epistolary fiction has been written by both men and women but has largely been viewed as an ideal vehicle for representing the voice of women due to the letter's association with emotion, domesticity and the interior life. Myra Jehlen argues that "what is peculiar to this genre is that it locates the problems of its society still deeper inside, inside the self"; however, "this interior life, *whether lived by man or woman, is female*, so that women characters define themselves and have power only within this realm", whereas it enables male characters "to act from their male side and feel from their female side" (92; emphasis in original). Male authors, particularly those of the eighteenth century which saw the rise of the novel as a literary form, would use the fictional epistle (the most prevalent narrative device of that era) as a means to represent women, but also to use this representation to continue to suppress women's ability to act in the public domain. It can also be argued that merely by reflecting the culturally constructed distinction between public and private, masculine and feminine, these authors were perpetuating patriarchal ideologies inherent in these oppositions, whether intentionally or not. Female epistolary authors occupy, both in the past and in the present, a more complex position since they can be seen to be participating in these ideologies, simply reflecting them or using their writing to rebel against and subvert them. By creating female characters who 'write themselves' in their letters they may be doing what Harriet Blodgett says female diarists do, since their self-preoccupation "contradicts and [...] undermines the absence of autonomy expected of the feminine role" (in Shiffman 94).

This thesis will explore how the epistolary mode has been employed in three texts written by women.¹ Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) all have female narrators who have experienced trauma and who write to their addressees as a way of understanding and

¹ I have chosen to use the term 'mode' in preference to the term 'genre' when referring to the more recent texts discussed in this thesis. In doing so, I am following the precedent set by Linda Kaufmann in her preface to *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* in which she asserts that 'mode' is a preferable term because, whereas older epistolary texts show a continuity within the genre, contemporary texts often show a discontinuity with their genre antecedents. She also contends that "the epistolary mode has a broader function than many other modes. It is able to combine with many other kinds; the very looseness of its conventions has made it resilient [and] adaptable" (xiii). I would argue that contemporary novels that include, for example, emails, blogs, Skype messages, SMSes, journal entries, diaries and transcripts of interviews cannot strictly be viewed as conforming to the epistolary genre but rather as employing the epistolary mode in some of its narrative devices. Also, because this thesis in part focuses on narrative voice, it is primarily interested in the modal dimensions of the texts rather than the generic dimensions of their form. For the purposes of accuracy, 'genre' is used when quoting a critic who has used the term and when discussing the historical development of the epistolary novel. It must be noted that although epistles precede the novel, and were intrinsic to the rise of the novel genre, they are often classified as a sub-genre of the novel.

processing their pain. The manifestations and intensities of their various traumatic experiences do differ vastly but as Cathy Caruth emphasises regarding trauma:

[It] cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may or may not traumatise everyone equally[...], rather, [it] consists solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated fully at the time but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. (*Explorations* 4, original emphasis)

In these texts all three narrators use their letters to assimilate what has already happened to them because they were unable to make sense of, or come to terms with, what happened to them at the time when it happened. Trauma, therefore, involves a wounding that recurs in the memory. Hence much of their letters consist of the sharing of memories and inviting the internal reader to co-occupy the space of those traumatic memories, so that in the process of doing so they will no longer have possession over her.

This study will examine how the letter-writers' individual traumas expressed in the private realm of the letter are also each framed by a specific collective history of trauma. Each narrator writes from a different context: Bâ's from a newly-independent Senegal, Walker's from the American South in the early decades of the twentieth century and Shriver's from a white middle-class United States at the turn of the millennium. Every narrator's letters reveal the impact of the socio-political forces that inform the personal crisis she undergoes. The revelation of these larger traumas demonstrates that the epistolary mode occupies a liminal space between the public and the private. This interstitial space is also created through the sharing of an interior world with another. The deconstruction of the binary between public and private and between masculine and feminine letter writing will also be explored from a feminist perspective. As Elizabeth Cook affirms, "feminist criticism expose[s] the cultural construction of the hierarchies of gender and genre that structure letter-narratives and their reception" (23). Also important to this study is an investigation of what the letters reveal about women's experiences of motherhood within their particular contexts, how these experiences can be related to trauma and/or its melioration as well as how the type of feminism the author appears to be espousing has influenced her depiction of motherhood. Julia Kristeva states that "an increasing number of women [...] do not only consider their maternity compatible with their professional life or their feminist involvement, [...] but also

find it indispensable to their discovery [...] of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain” (455). This thesis will appraise how the three primary texts use the epistolary mode to convey these complexities.

This first chapter of the thesis will provide a brief historical overview of the epistolary mode, thereby supplying a genealogical context for the texts that will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four. This history of epistolary fictions from ancient Greece to the twenty-first century attempts to account for how and why letters came to be associated with the female voice and with the domestic realm or private sphere. Chapter two examines the formal and functional characteristics of the epistolary mode in order to provide a theoretical framework that will assist in the analysis of the primary texts. It will explore, through examples, the distinguishing features of epistolary fictions and how these features affect the way in which the text is read. Chapter three analyses how Mariama Bâ uses the epistolary mode in *So Long a Letter* to critique the elements of Islamic post-colonial Senegalese society which continue to silence women and consign them to the domestic realm, juxtaposing it with Alice Walker’s use of the epistolary mode to give voice to her narrator Celie’s history of sexual abuse in *The Color Purple*. While these two novels are very different in terms of context, narrative voice and the type of feminism with which the author aligns herself, both novels have narrators which use the letter to reconstitute themselves in societies that marginalise them in a number of ways. In pairing them here, I attempt to trace a particular moment in feminist-inflected epistolary fiction by focusing on how the writing of letters enables the narrator in each case to share her painful history, connect with other women who have experienced similar trauma, and move towards healing and forgiveness. The following chapter focuses on Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in which the narrator, Eva, the mother of a boy who kills his father, sister and nine other people at his middle-class American school, uses her letters in an attempt to process the trauma of these deaths. Because Eva’s addressee is the late husband she is mourning (and who thus cannot respond and answer her anguished questions), healing and the achievement of a neat resolution to the questions Eva confronts are shown to be impossible. The narrative voice Shriver creates is thus consistently unsettling in its ambivalent negotiation of maternal culpability in her son’s crime and self-exoneration, which overtly and critically engages debates about American school shootings, family values and the figure of the mother. In contrast to the substantial body of analytical and interpretive work on Bâ’s and Walker’s novels, this novel has as yet received very little critical attention, which is why a full chapter has been devoted to it. This

thesis therefore attempts to add to existing critical work on epistolary fiction by applying feminist theories on maternal ambivalence and studies on trauma and mourning, informed by up-to-date research on school shootings, to a very challenging and compelling contemporary epistolary novel.

The letter has played a part in human connections and communication throughout recorded history. According to Claudio Guillén, there is ample evidence that in ancient societies with orthographies, the sending of written correspondence was a common occurrence (3). The numerous surviving personal letters from ancient Greece, for instance, demonstrate a thriving correspondence culture amongst men and women.² While women were largely excluded from political life and, apart from Sappho, literary and philosophical circles, it was seen as acceptable for women to engage in epistolary exchanges. This was first reflected in fiction in Ovid's *Heroides* (possibly between 25 and 16BCE) in which jilted women – all of them from mythological tales – express their longing, desire and anger in letters addressed to their neglectful lovers. It is important to note that the first fictional letters were therefore written by a man speaking as a woman and that the letter form was deemed an appropriate vehicle for representing the female voice.

Even these first letter fictions, which most critics view as the origin of the amorous epistolary mode, have a paradoxical and contentious nature. Linda Kauffman believes that these origins are transgressive since up till then all fictions had been in the form of plays and epic verses valourising masculine bravery. She asserts that for Ovid to write like a woman “is to challenge conventional notions of traditions, of origins, of fathers, of paternity, of authority, of identity” (*Discourses* 61). On the other hand, Sara Lindheim claims that since all these women complain about what their male lovers have inflicted upon them, it shows Ovid's desire to “construct characters that conform with a male fantasy that finds it comforting to imagine insignificant women and powerful heroes” (76). It is certainly true that for many feminist critics the question of male representation of women's voices remains a controvertible subject. Jill Connelly terms Ovid's writing of the female voice a “transvestite ventriloquism” and acknowledges that men's attempts to create authentic female voices will always be “a thorny issue” (131). This proto-epistolary work set in motion the gendering of

² Clare Brant prefers the term ‘personal’ over ‘private’ when referring to real people's letters. According to her, “personal letters articulate in miniature the concerns of a wider society” and that while “those concerns do include designating certain kinds of material as private, they do not privilege paradigms of secrecy which have more to do with epistolary fiction than real correspondence” (5).

the mode as well as its inherently contradictory character: it appears to give women a voice but confines this voice to private correspondence which is then published in the public arena.

Apart from the association with the female voice, Ovid's use of the letter mode established a few other epistolary conventions.³ Firstly, many of these letters are narrated by women confined to their homes whilst the men to whom they write have abandoned them in favour of travel and/or adventure. The letters are emblematic of the narrator's relegation to the domestic sphere but are sent out to travel to her lover on her behalf. Ironically, although writing from home, the narrator may not view her domicile as a safe abode and place of belonging and instead transfer these qualities onto her addressee. For example, Penelope who stays behind to rule Ithaca in her husband's stead tells the travelling Ulysses: "You are my refuge and my home, my husband" (6). Secondly, because each of these abandoned women does not receive a reply from her faithless lover, it heightens the external reader's sense of the narrator's isolation and loneliness. This became a feature of epistolary novels which did not consist of a correspondence between two people. Whereas a letter of response from the addressee creates a feeling of connection and reciprocity, a lack of response highlights the extent to which the narrator is cut off and alone. Kauffmann argues that in the *Heroides* the letters are "addressed to the absent beloved, yet paradoxically simultaneously dramatize his silence" (*Discourses* 25).

The lack of responding epistle is also seen in the next important epistolary text, the *Lettres Portugaises*, which was translated into English as *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* in 1669.⁴ These five epistles were purported to have been written by a Portuguese nun, Marianna Alcoforado, to a French officer who had deserted her. The reading public was fascinated by this glimpse into the heart of someone usually confined to the most private and enclosed of positions in society. Their voyeuristic interest was titillated by the exposure of the intimate

³ *Heroides* was widely read in Latin throughout Europe from the late eleventh century onwards and appears to have influenced not only other epistolary fictions but real letter-writers too. Abelard, the monk castrated and confined to the monastery as punishment for his elopement with the young Heloise, even references them in one of his letters to his friend Philintus when he says, "I [...] practised the precepts of the more ingenious Ovid. No day passed in which I did not compose amorous verses" (Letter 1). Peter Dronke also claims that Heloise used them as a model in her letters to Abelard (256). It would seem that these fictional letters became a kind of template for separated lovers who wanted to express their longing and desire.

⁴ According to Robert Day, letters were often included in plays, poems and tales throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance (10), but the *Lettres Portugaises* was the first published text since *Heroides* to consist solely of letters. It was a hugely influential text – demonstrated in how subsequent amorous epistolary fictions were commonly termed *Portugaises*. The translation of this text into several languages also shows how literature was consumed across borders and that ideas, styles and modes of discourse spread throughout Europe.

thoughts of a woman typically veiled in silence, even more so because she uses her letters to express longing and desire and are, as such, transgressive. Although it has since been contended that the letters are, in fact, a literary fabrication by Gabriel-Joseph de la Vergne Guillerages, at the time they were believed to have been genuine expressions of the trauma associated with thwarted desire, recrimination and frustration. This credibility is boosted by what Robert Day calls a “style carefully calculated to give the impression that the nun was dashing her unpremeditated thoughts down on paper as fast as they came, an effect which was enhanced by the use of dashes and sudden exclamations” (34).⁵ Whether the letters are real or fictional, the crafting of spontaneity – again a paradoxical concept – creates the impression of immediacy which has become an important feature of almost all subsequent epistolary fictions.

Kauffman also notes that the nun’s frantic voicing of desire through writing is a common characteristic of amorous epistolary discourse. These confessions of desire for her former lover paradoxically arouse desire, for the more she speaks of it, the more she keeps it alive (*Discourses* 105). The chevalier’s absence only intensifies her need to give expression to this desire, for by writing to him she can conjure up his presence and “sustain the illusion of the chevalier’s active engagement with her” (*Discourses* 105). The contradictory absent-present dynamic is found in all epistolary correspondences, both real and fictional. By addressing her chevalier throughout the text, he also becomes ‘present’ to the external reader. Guillén says that this makes all epistolary novels polysemic because we are cognizant of the “blurred identity of that psychic presence, that second person, to and for whom the letter is written” (7). This, he says, creates a “complex awareness in the reader of the multi-layered nature of the addressee and hence of the entire text, governed as it is by the superposition of private communication and public exhibition” (7). The author of any epistolary novel thus employs this mode precisely because it relies on the reader’s implicit belief in the privacy of letters which then places the reader in the position of voyeur and even, perhaps, of violator or intruder into something personal. Descriptions of amorous interactions are therefore not

⁵ Day’s assertion that the style is “carefully calculated” rests on his assumption of male authorship. The style of writing aimed at capturing overwrought emotions which men associated with women may prefigure the sentimental discourse of eighteenth-century fictions. It will be demonstrated that feminist critics view this discourse as patronising and constricting. In addition, feminist critics like Claire Goldstein view the denial of Alcoforada’s authorship as typical of patriarchal silencing of women’s voices and of robbing them of the right to speak for themselves. She also argues that male critics who believe the text to be authentic in turn use it to “rehearse, reinstate and trade upon the naturalised category of femininity and female writing” (578).

merely a way for the narrator to relive them and re-experience that passion, but also a clever way to involve the external reader in vicarious fantasy.

Aphra Behn uses this device throughout the first part of her *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684). The first long novel written in English, this tale of forbidden love between a young courtier, Philander, and his beautiful sister-in-law, Silvia, traces the development of their incestuous relationship from flirtation, through seduction and abduction, to the trauma of betrayal and abandonment. When writing to her lover, Silvia's erotic descriptions of their nocturnal meetings are technically unnecessary since Philander was there. Hence passages – such as, “What tho' I lay extended on my Bed undrest, unapprehensive of my Fate, my Bosom loose and easy of access, my Garments ready, thin and wantonly put on, as if they would with little Force submit to the fond straying Hand” (68) – are what Ruth Perry calls “explicit invitations to the reader-at-home, too, to indulge in voyeuristic fantasy” (157).

Behn's readers were doubly stimulated by the knowledge that the story they were immersing themselves in was based on real events. The scandal of the abduction of Henrietta Berkeley by her brother-in-law, the rakish Lord Grey, was a rich source of society gossip after the unravelling of the Monmouth Rebellion. Behn's novel was an ingenious *roman à clef* which imagined the intimate exchanges that precipitated and maintained the real-life drama. Behn does not sustain the use of letters throughout the text and gradually editorialises more and more until the novel makes way for third-person narration of Silvia's rejection of Philander's authority over her after he abandons her. The first third of the novel is by far the most engaging and believable primarily because the letters enable the reader to participate in the initial emotional frenzy of the lovers and sympathise with their passion for each other which defied convention.

Although it is seldom read today, Behn's novel played a significant role in cementing the popularity of the epistolary form, particularly with the growing middle-class female readership. That the author was a woman who wrote novels of political intrigue and used her texts to critique modes of government is particularly noteworthy. The novel was written in the Restoration era when there was much tension between fiercely Royalist sentiments and growing tendencies towards Parliamentary democracy and individualism. Francis Steen views Behn's depiction of transgressive love as a model for the relationship between the king

and his subjects since the “conceptual spaces of passionate love and autocratic power [create] a potent conceptual blend” (91) evincing a nation in flux. Hence, the private mode of letters, with its connotations of emotion and inter-personal connection, opens up the dialogue between the private sphere of the heart and the public sphere of politics, philosophy and gender relations.

The real letters of Heloise and Abelard, published in English in 1713, also added to interrogations of gender roles since these letters show the authentic voice of a woman who refuses to obey her former mentor’s injunction to silence and submission to masculine authority. Abelard the Monk, now castrated, rationally attempts to convince Abbess Heloise to forget their relationship and eradicate any remnants of sexual desire in service to God. Kauffman argues that her emotional dismissal of his argument shows “a defiant transgression of the tyrannies of logic and abstinence, an affirmation of all that remains uncircumscribed, unrepented, and, alas, irremediable in the realm of desire” (*Discourses* 89). It is fascinating that such a text was so appealing to a society in which women’s sexuality was viewed as a threat to social order. In the early eighteenth century, women’s role as the upholders of virtue, particularly chastity, was constantly preached from the pulpits and periodicals. The popularity of Heloise’s letters betrays a guilty enchantment with the very thing society was supposed to abhor.

Although the letters were written in the twelfth century, and the doomed lovers’ story was already well known, their English translation was enormously well-received and further stimulated the reading public’s fancy for epistolary fiction. In the eighty years before Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Robert Day counts over two hundred epistolary works in five hundred editions (2). This accounts for about a fifth of all publications of fiction during that time and this portion would grow substantially during the eighteenth century when the epistolary form was in its heyday. It was a narrative mode particularly favoured by women writers like Eliza Haywood, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, Delarivière Manley and Mary Davys, possibly because the format required no formal education (to which very few women had access) and because women had always been encouraged to write letters. Their letter novels allowed women to speak for themselves and also demonstrated, according to Anna Viele, “the woman writer’s precarious position in the market place” (135) because her subversion of authority had to be subtle. For instance, Davys’ *The Reform’d Coquet* (1724), says Viele, “presents the coquette as an alternative to the traditional heroine of romance” (135) even

though she eventually learns from her frivolous mistakes and settles down to a conventional marriage. Paula Backscheider and John Richetti affirm that novels written by women between 1660 and 1730 played an enormous role in the rise in popularity of the novel as a literary form. They state that they are “self-consciously individualised works [which] add to popular scandal and easy eroticism, an intellectual and political sophistication and a proto-feminist signature” (xii) and are the “writer’s means of dramatising the universal and replicated conditions of women in the patriarchy” (xiii).

It is significant, therefore, that though women writers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries used the epistolary mode to represent their own voices and reflect and/or subvert patriarchal models of submissive and passive women, their texts have been largely ignored in traditional canons and rarely studied. Socio-literary historians, like Ian Watts, trace the origins of the novel form to Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, and completely disregard the novels which were already circulating throughout England, many of them epistolary and many of them written by women.⁶ It is no surprise that when male authors of the eighteenth century – long inaccurately viewed as the originators of the novel form – presented women’s voices they were almost invariably arranged within letters and conformed to patriarchal ideals of female rectitude.⁷ Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) have heroines whose unassailable virtue is contrasted to the vices of immoral characters. The actions of the rake and his (male and female) accomplices served as a warning to the impressionable readership and, as such, had a didactic function. These pedagogical novels were enormously popular in conservative societies, such as Puritan America where women were expected to uphold the moral values of the fledgling country, so much so that they spawned a species of copies which venerated the *Clarissa* figure. The intention was to demonstrate both behaviour which should be replicated and which should be avoided. *Clarissa*, the dying ravished victim of the notorious libertine, Lovelace, has all her

⁶ Watts links the rise of the novel with an embracing of Locke’s Realist philosophy which profoundly affected Enlightenment thought. Locke highlighted the uniqueness of each individual’s experience in a particular time and place, emphasising that people grow and change as a result of time and personal experiences. The epistolary form was well suited to realistic individual character development over time, especially as the chronology of the letters allowed the external reader to witness these changes in a way that felt authentic. Perry, on the other hand, attributes the embracing of realism to the “residual Puritan distaste for falsehood as well as the craze for scientific objectivity” (x), whilst Elizabeth Cook situates the epistolary novel in a society saturated in letters. She states that Enlightenment culture can be termed a “Republic of Letters” since travel books, scientific journals, political essays and newspapers all used letters to convey information and ideas (17).

⁷ A notable exception is Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741) which satirised Richardson’s *Pamela*. This parody rewrites *Pamela*’s character as a devious prostitute who deliberately sets about fooling Squire Booby into love and marriage. Fielding’s travesty also pokes fun at the epistolary form itself by highlighting its limitations through exaggerating the inclusion of the mundane details of daily life.

correspondence collected and sends the instruction that the beneficiary of her letters, Anna Howe, should use her tale to help other innocent girls to avoid the same traumatic fate. Richardson, who also wrote and published popular letter manuals, viewed his novels as moral guides and the letter form as the best way to reflect the reality of sin and create pathos for the exemplary pious virgin.

Pathos is always more likely when the victim's story is related in the first person. The narrating "I" of a letter gives a subjective perspective of his/her experiences which is usually conveyed emotively.⁸ This sentimentality expressed through letters increased incrementally through the eighteenth century. Nicola Watson also links this to a growing acceptance of Locke's philosophy of "exquisite individual sensibility" and believes that the subjective narration of letters lent itself to the exploration of natural human sentiments which were self-authorising rather than ruled entirely by external social structures (24). While the emotions of these sentimental novels are in general overwrought, the readers lapped up the heroine's extreme displays of distress. In both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, the heroines express heightened vexation at being confined and faint, and remain unconscious for a time, whenever their chastity is under threat. Even though these reactions appear rather hyperbolic and silly to a modern reader, it appears that the mid-to-late eighteenth-century public found such magnified behaviour entirely believable. The subjective narration inherent in the epistolary form created the appearance of credibility notwithstanding the incongruity of the ridiculously amplified emotions of the characters. This co-occurring semblance of truth with embroidered hysterics produced the ideal platform from which to show women how they would and should react, as well as how to avoid the fatal flaw of naivety in the face of malicious intentions.

Despite Squire B____'s intent to make Pamela his mistress, her tale ends happily and her virtue is rewarded with earthly riches whereas Clarissa's miserable story serves as a warning of what seeking after such riches can catalyse. *Pamela* instructs as to how to adapt to social advancement, but *Clarissa* alerts to the dangers of placing such advancement over piety and

⁸ The didacticism of Richardson's novels was not only relevant to the sphere of the emotions. The rigid class system in England was slowly dissolving as the middle classes began their ascendancy and the aristocracy's absolute power started to show cracks. Due to growing industrialisation, class mobility became a possibility and the middle class had more leisure time to read. Betty Schellenberg asserts that the rise of a popular literary epistolary tradition "parallels – indeed enables – the first stages in the emergence of a middle class culture defined by well-developed literacy and self-consciousness about personal identity and class affiliation" (290). This emerging class needed instruction as to how to negotiate their new status and the literature aimed at this readership fulfilled this function. Pamela's rise from ingénue serving girl to sophisticated mistress of her household serves as example of what a change in class would entail.

familial love. Clarissa's middle-class family insists that she marry the repugnant Mr Solmes because it will enlarge and consolidate their estate. She becomes a pawn in their greedy capitalist quest during which they repress their love for her and lock her up in her room. Their attempts to suppress and control her letter writing are the primary methods they use to try to bend her to their wills. Clarissa secretly writes most of her letters to her dear friend, Anna Howe, whose epistolary responses are filled with advice and affection. Clarissa also transgresses by corresponding with the rake Lovelace whose morals her family despises.⁹ When they discover this correspondence they condemn her to isolation and confinement. To abate the loneliness of her imprisonment, Clarissa reaches out through her letters. Epistles are thus her crime, her punishment and her emotional release.

Letters, like those between Clarissa and Anna, create a link of solidarity and encouragement between like-minded women who are separated from each other due to tyrannous confinement. However, the association of women with emotive letters has led to mistaken conceptions of it as a 'feminine genre', as though only women wrote and received sentimental letters and as though these were the only kinds of letters to appear in publications. Cook warns against this kind of categorisation as follows:

When the epistolary genre is seen as limited to the sentimental epistolary plot of feminine passion, the exclusive identification of women and letters reaffirms essentialist concepts of gender and sexuality, as well as replicating an artificial division of human experience into separate and gendered public and private spheres. (24)

Close examination of the correspondence between Lovelace and his confidant, Belford, reveals that the men also frequently indulge in emotional descriptions of events. Belford's depiction of Clarissa's death is particularly poignant and moving while Lovelace's distressed response demonstrates genuine grief. Yet, these passages are often ignored in favour of the passages that reveal Lovelace's cunning and artifice. Selective readings of the text serve to divide writing into 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles – divisions which are synthetic and perpetuate the stereotypes and misconceptions regarding gender and writing technique. The

⁹ Clarissa does not encourage Lovelace and admonishes him for writing to her, but even in doing so, she sustains a correspondence. Bernard Duyfhuizen says that, "because the letter textualises the forbidden discourse of seduction, to answer the letter, even with the aim of discouraging its author, is to enter into a seductive discourse and to engage the double narrative of transmission and transgression" (22-23).

novel of sentiment, written in the rhetoric of sensibility, was for a long time regarded as the perfect vehicle for expressing female subjectivity. However, Mary Jacobus argues that this “prison of sensibility is created by patriarchy to contain women; thus they experience desire without law, language without power” (in Watson 57). Condemned to writing within this rhetoric, associated with feeling – even insanity – instead of logic, they are neither taken seriously within nor heard outside of this discourse.

There are numerous examples of the speciousness of these gender polarities within the epistolary form both in English texts and Continental ones. Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe’s sensitive hero of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is so disconsolate over his unrequited love for Lotte that his letters to his friend, Wilhelm, are filled with languishing and despair over her unattainability. The ascribed ‘masculine’ attribute of ‘logic’ and its ‘feminine’ dyad of ‘irrationality’ are repudiated by Werther’s declarations of love which are tinged with madness, for example, “it is as if every nerve of my soul was turned about” (33) and “I am done for. My senses are in confusion, for a week I have been unable to think straight, my eyes are full of tears” (89). Furthermore, false divisions along gender lines are not restricted to style but are often made regarding content as well. For example, Cook notes that Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu’s satirical *Persian Letters* (1721), in which two Persian noblemen travel through France commenting on the bizarreness of French institutions, are often divided into two ‘types’ of letters. When the letters contain political or social critique they are seen as masculine, but when they deal with the narrators’ harems they are seen as domestic and therefore feminine. She views this as problematic for “as long as gender is assumed to be the primary analytical category for reading we will necessarily produce variations of the gendered dichotomies that split the text apart unsatisfyingly” (25).

Although these polarities were imposed on texts fallaciously, the association of letters with the confined, domestic, female voice was difficult to eradicate. When the representation of women in epistolary texts began to change on the Continent under the influence of emerging democratic ideals, it was precisely this association that led to the epistolary genre falling out of favour in Britain.¹⁰ The seismic move towards democracy, in France in particular, was

¹⁰Ideas regarding gender and politics were not limited to the countries in which the texts were originally published. English epistolary novels influenced French and German writers and vice versa. *Clarissa* had such a huge impact overseas that in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ complicated seduction-plot novel *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), the Marquise de Merteuil refers to the novel in one of her letters and scornfully compares the naïve Cecile to Richardson’s titular heroine. In turn, William Godwin terms Mary Wollstonecraft “a female Werther”

accompanied by a philosophical rebellion against religious, patriarchal and aristocratic rule in favour of individual rights and freedoms. This was reflected in pre-revolutionary epistolary texts such as Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's *Fanni Butlerd* (1757) in which Fanni transforms herself from private victim of seduction to public author by publishing her own letters, as Cook points out. She argues that this "public denunciation of social corruption through the enlightenment technology of print" (28) results in an acknowledgement of female citizenship: an idea which was radical at the time and with which British readers were uncomfortable. They were accustomed to female letter-writers who were enclosed within the male editor's voice or, when written by a woman, characters who eventually sublimated their desires to fit the requirements of social etiquette. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) had a profound impact on social constructions of all kinds. Nicola Watson ascribes British reactions to this seminal text as the reason for the epistolary form's demise in English literature. She believes this epistolary novel's ideas about self-determination – seen in Julie's choice of passion for her lover over duty and ultimate rejection of the rule of her father on her death bed – were instrumental in changing attitudes regarding autonomy; attitudes that would ultimately lead to the French Revolution. The excessive 'sensibility' of the epistolary form, the British felt, had its undesirable consequences in the fall of the Bastille and the Terror. Radical Jacobin sympathisers in England, like Helen Williams, Eliza Fenwick, Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith, wrote their own versions of the Julie story which would, according to Watson, "ratify the heroine's self-legitimizing revolutionary desire as expressed in letters" (19). These texts further cemented conservative anxieties about classism, individual freedoms and female desire. Watson argues that, although the epistolary form had always had a "broadly dissenting tradition" (6), sentimental discourse was now thoroughly politicised and equated with chaos and transgressive female sexuality, a sexuality that had to be repressed and contained.

The letter in the fictions from the last decade of the eighteenth century onwards remained a marker of disruptive female desire, but authors keen to subject it to controlling ideological structures began to limit its appearance in their texts. Instead of the entire novel consisting of a correspondence, letters were alluded to, partially quoted, paraphrased, waylaid, intercepted, interrupted, misread, redelivered and redirected within the structures of first- and third-person narration. Watson confirms that this was a social and narrative order that attempted to

in his novelisation of her life, due to a similar *sturm and drang* style (in Watson 64). According to Watson, it was precisely this cross-pollination that would lead to the fall of the epistolary form in English literature.

discipline the “subversiveness of illicit correspondence and the heroine’s related insurrection” (69) so that it could evacuate the erotics of the novel of sensibility in favour of a novel of social consensus (68). Third-person omniscient narration helped to support the notion of public consensus and objectivity. The private circulation of the solipsistic emotive letter thus made way for texts that redirected the heroine back to the patriarchal family through the all-knowing objective voice.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, another reason why epistles were seldom used as narrative devices was because of the influence of Romanticism which saw greater attention to the role of physical setting. In earlier epistolary texts, the scenery surrounding the letter-writers was hardly described, resulting in a far narrower sense of space. The ‘space’ of the letter was thus an enclosed, internal one suggested by the boundaries of the letter itself. Romanticism witnessed an opening up of this space as man began to reflect on his relationship with nature and the cosmos. The interior space of letters was no longer consistent with their concerns with their natural, historical and social surroundings and, consequently, there are very few entirely epistolary novels in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, these have plots that highlight actions that are spiritually and morally divergent from the norm. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) consists of letters from the ambitious explorer Walton to his sister, Margaret, detailing his pride-fuelled endeavours to reach the North Pole. During his life-threatening adventure he meets a dying Victor Frankenstein who tells him of the terrible consequences of his playing God by creating life out of death. Both the vengeful, murderous monster and over-reaching Frankenstein’s first-person stories are enclosed within Walton’s personal letters, suggesting that their transgressive deeds should remain a secret between Walton and his sister. Similarly, in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Gilbert Markham writes to his brother-in-law Halford, describing his enchantment with the new tenant of Wildfell Hall, Helen Graham, who returns his affections but is inexplicably unable to act on them. By way of explanation, she gives Markham her diary in which she has recorded her experiences of being married to the dissolute and emotionally abusive alcoholic, Arthur Huntingdon, from whom she escapes. Her husband’s eventual death due to his life of dissipation, allows Gilbert and Helen to find their happiness together. In both texts, the narrating “I” tells a story that goes against the religious and moral prescriptions of that time (Frankenstein defies God, his monster murders all his creator holds dear, and Helen leaves her husband), but their tales are encompassed by letters. This creates a ‘double privacy’ but also a ‘layered publicity’ since they tell their stories to the male letter-writer who relates them

to the addressee, the correspondence to which the external reader is privy. The epistle thus continued to occupy a liminal space between the public and the private and to convey the notions of secrecy and transgression but it was no longer associated with the female voice in particular.

The decline of the epistolary as a narrative device continued into the twentieth century. While modernist writers were exploring the use of stream of consciousness, interior monologue and multiple points of view within their novels, they reserved letter-writing for their private correspondences and did not include letters as forms of narrative. It is possible that since they wanted to do something 'new', they perceived the epistolary form as something 'old'. The epistolary mode virtually disappeared as a result.¹¹ It is significant, therefore, that some important texts written by women propelled by the ideals and goals of feminism in the later part of the twentieth century used this 'old' form that had largely been associated with repression and patriarchal representation. By appropriating a mode with connotations of the silencing and confinement of the female voice to the private, domestic sphere, these writers used their texts to demonstrate these attributes of oppression within their societies and thus critique and rebel against them. It can be argued that the women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had tried to do just that, albeit in a more subtle way, and it is ironic that the repression of their texts by the masculinisation of the canon creates a kind of 'double silencing'. However, the empowerment brought about by feminism in the twentieth century would create a platform for women of many different backgrounds and convictions to give expression to their concerns and experiences of trauma. In societies where women are oppressed by multiple sources of marginalisation, the epistolary mode is a fitting one for both demonstrating and subverting that oppression. Elizabeth Campbell concurs that many of these epistolary texts are written "by women in post-colonial cultures, in which women have been doubly oppressed, from outside by a chauvinistic imperialism and from within by a patriarchy

¹¹ A few epistolary texts were written but these merit discussion under a different study. John Barth saw the letter form as a unique way to probe the boundary between the real and the fictional. His *Letters* (1979) was a series of correspondences between himself and some of the characters he had invented in previous novels. This opens up questions about the relationship between an author and his subjects in a very literal sense; or between the author and the various manifestations of his own psyche. Postmodern novels like *Letters* (1979) destabilise the representational status of writing and create a discursive self-consciousness which, according to Janet Altman, overtly challenges the novel's traditional narrativity (211). Jacques Derrida's deconstruction paid attention to "thematizations of textuality in literary works" and his *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980) uses "the letter as a trope for all writing" (Cook 23) in the sense that all writing is a correspondence of some kind. He did not see the epistolary as distinct from other literary genres and used this satirical epistolary novel to critique Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis.

which itself felt oppressed by outside forces” (332). The texts that will be examined in chapter three, Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, use the letter mode to demonstrate these multiple marginalisations which continue to consign women to the domestic sphere.

While the novel discussed in chapter four, Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, does not arise from an obviously patriarchal context, its examination of motherhood with its attendant difficulties, complexities and ambivalences does show that American (and arguably most other contemporary societies’) ideas about motherhood are still informed by patriarchal constructions and expectations which are placed unfairly upon women. In addition, the narrator, Eva, is ostracised and figuratively confined since her son’s crime has isolated her from the rest of society. Eva writes of her lingering desire for her husband and attempts to keep him present by speaking to him through her letters. She writes of her private traumas but, in doing so, also exposes the very public phenomenon of school shootings. Her exploration of personally experienced violence is framed by the larger historical traumas of the Armenian genocide and the Second World War. This self-conscious engagement of the intersection of private and public traumas, is an element that Shriver’s novel shares with earlier epistolary texts. However, she uses this feature to deliberately foreground change since her novel does not supply the comforting resolution of these traumas which her twentieth-century epistolary antecedents – Bâ and Walker – provide. This makes it exemplary of contemporary experiments with the mode which is why it forms the culminating point of the trajectory of exploration of the mode’s expression of trauma.

Chapter 2

Characteristics and Thematic Emphases of the Epistolary Mode:

An Overview

The history of epistolary fiction outlined in the previous chapter explored the evolution of this mode in order to provide a context for the texts that will be discussed in chapters three and four. In this chapter, the formal and functional features common to epistolary texts will be examined, with reference to examples from epistolary novels spanning the last four centuries, to illustrate how these features affect the way the text is read, while also identifying patterns of thematic emphasis to which the epistolary mode lends itself.¹ It thus establishes the theoretical base from which to examine the three primary texts to be analysed in the ensuing chapters. While some elements of the epistolary mode have changed, such as the use of overwrought sentimental discourse, others remain largely the same, despite the mode sometimes adapting to modern technologies. For instance, letters written in the form of emails still invoke the illusion, for the external reader, of voyeuristically observing a private correspondence. Although epistolary texts share some features with other narrative modes (like the assumed intimacy between the narrator and reader when a first-person narrator is employed; as well as the subjectivity and interiority found in diaries, journals and life writing) there are elements unique to the letter mode which, as Janet Altman affirms, influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers (4). The author, of course, makes a conscious choice to use the epistle as narrative instrument, a selection which can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types and narrative self-consciousness (Altman 9).

One of the most salient features of an epistolary text is the double narrative inherent to its construction. There is the narrative of the plot that unfolds within the sequence of letters and there is also the narrative of the relationship which exists between the narrator and the addressee. This 'I-you' relationship alters the meaning the external reader attributes to the letters because he/she is always conscious of who the narrator is writing to and is aware of how this addressee influences the narrator's voice. Altman calls this "pronominal relativity"

¹ Key examples from epistolary novels will be discussed within the main body of the text, whilst additional examples which augment the argument will be footnoted.

(81) because the narrator's style and tone will change depending on who he/she is writing to. Lovelace, the heartless libertine of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), serves as illustration. When he writes to Clarissa his tone is deferential and courteous, but when he writes to his friend, Belford, his tone is triumphant, sneering and determined. In fact, he even mocks the pious tone he feels forced to take in order to win Clarissa's heart (Volume 3, Letter XVI). Lovelace is candid with Belford and devious in his false piety towards the woman he plans to vanquish. A pronominal friendship, rather than an amorous relationship, is thus more likely to result in genuine confessions since there is no ulterior motive and often no reason for dishonesty. Consequently, in seduction plots the rake's tone in writing to his confidant provides the external reader with an understanding of his true intentions. In addition to tone, the relationship between narrator and addressee also helps the external reader to distinguish between letters full of artifice and sincere letters. For instance, when the libertine Peter Sanford writes to the credulous Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette* (1797), Hannah Webster Foster's early America epistolary novel based on the real life seduction and subsequent death of the young Elizabeth Whitman, he is charming and makes hyperbolic declarations of love and torment, such as: "To what lengths my despair may carry me, I know not! You are the arbitress of my fate" (177). However, when he writes to his fellow rake, Charles Deighton, he is brutally honest about his desire to ravish the beautiful Eliza and to lead her on with false promises of marriage. Sanford tells his friend that which he cannot reveal to his victim just after he has seduced her when he writes: "I have carried my point, and am amply revenged on the whole posse of those dear friends of hers [...]. Thank God, I have no conscience. If I had, I believe it would make wretched work with me!" (180). Sanford and Deighton's pronominal relationship as fellow Lotharios enables the external reader to grasp which recipient is a co-conspirator and which recipient is being deceived. In cases like these, there is not only a double narrative but also a 'double reading'. Altman states that the addressee, or internal reader, "refracts events through two prisms" and that the external reader will "always interpret a given letter in the light of its intended recipient" (92). When the letter is written by a libertine to his intended conquest, the external reader knows what lies beneath the surface in these duplicitous letters and can perceive how the innocent addressee is being duped. This creates a reading not only of the letter but also of the effect of the letter on the addressee.

The 'you' being addressed thus affects how the external reader interprets the content, tone and impact of the letters. The addressee also affects the 'I' of narration since the narrator may be shaped through their correspondence. This is particularly true when the narrator is seeking

advice from his/her correspondent who is often someone older and wiser. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Pamela's parents' warnings to maintain her chastity and not to give in to Squire B____'s seductions inspire in her a firm resolution to withstand his assaults. Although she has not seen her parents since she was a young girl, their frequent correspondence has instilled in her their values, so much so that she tells them: "father and mother, be assured, that by God's grace, I never will do anything that shall bring your grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. I will die a thousand deaths rather than be dishonest in any way" (Letter III). What Pamela's parents think of her and expect of her – ideas which are conveyed in their letters – are so important to her that they shape her behaviour and attitudes. Claudio Guillen argues that this "function of epistolarity is affected insofar as it depends on the imaginary copresence of the other – on the relevance of the recipient" (7). Because her relationship with her parents matters to Pamela, their presence is conjured up, not just when she writes to them, but even when they are not there. Thus, when writing to a mentor who has always provided guidance and advice, a narrator may already anticipate what kind of moral stance this addressee will take and this will shape his/her behaviour.²

This is not always the case, however. Sometimes the addressee is not characterised and is nothing more than a sounding board for the narrator's feelings or the relation of events. While this addressee may have a name, the passive confidant, according to Altman, "loses his specificity to coincide with the external reader who could be anyone" (91).³ In such texts, the addressee is entirely unimportant and the letter therefore merely a conceit used to reveal the intimate details one would usually reserve for private correspondence. John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, aka *Fanny Hill* (1748), is a fitting illustration of this. Fanny, now respectably married and retired from her work as a London prostitute, writes to

² Similarly, when Evelina, the innocent young heroine of Fanny Burney's 1778 eponymous epistolary novel, writes to her guardian, the Reverend Mr Villars, she tells him: "I will endeavor to act as if I was guided by your advice; and, making it my sole aim to deserve it, leave to time and fate my success or disappointment." (Letter LXVI). Villars' epistolary advice regarding how to respond to events that have already taken place influences Evelina's decisions and they also mould how she will respond to things that are yet to happen, as if his epistolary voice is constantly guiding her.

³ A good example of this is found in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) wherein the narrator, Gilbert Markham, writes to his brother-in-law, Jack Halford, telling him about how he met, fell in love with and eventually married the mysterious Helen Graham. On the first page of his letter he explains why he is writing such a long epistle – "When we were together last, you gave me a very particular and interesting account of the most remarkable occurrences of your early life, previous to our acquaintance; and then you requested a return of confidence from me" (1) – and then does not refer to Halford or address him directly again till the salutation at the end of the novel. The external reader is hardly aware, while reading Markham's account, that it is in fact a letter because the addressee does not appear to shape the narrator's story. Halford simply provides the rationale for Markham's long tale and does not influence any aspect of it whatsoever.

an unknown female addressee, revealing all the steamy details of her sordid career. She tells the recipient of her letter, “I shall recall to view those scandalous stages of my life” and that she is “careless of violating those laws of decency that were never made for such unreserved intimacies as ours” (1). Fanny’s description of her relationship with her addressee as intimate creates a platform from which she can proceed to describe erotic events without shame or fear of shocking this internal reader. Since Fanny does not identify her addressee or make reference to her again, the external reader is in a sense invited to take on her place as observer. This enhances the voyeuristic nature of the novel since having to bear the addressee in mind while reading the novel would have added a layer which can potentially distance the external reader from the action, much of which involves Fanny watching other lovers engage in sexual encounters. When she, for instance, hides behind a door to watch her first such encounter, the external reader ‘watches’ Fanny watching the lovers: “I stole softly to the door where a knot in the wood had been slipped out and afforded a very commanding peep-hole to the scene then in agitation, the actors of which had been too earnestly employed” (52). Her subsequent description of what she witnesses shows that the author clearly has the external reader in mind rather than her addressee who is deliberately not mentioned here or elsewhere in the text. This kind of single-voice epistolary novel, Lorna Martens argues, “reduce[s] the fictive reader to a nonpersonality, a mere ear for the reception of confidences, so that the existence of the addressee does not affect the content, quality, or tone of the letter-writer’s thoughts” (78). Here, the reduction of the addressee has an erotic function since the retelling has to be uninhibited and create the impression of authenticity. This genuineness would have been undermined if the addressee were to have been perceived by the external reader as influencing the narrator.

In some epistolary texts, the fact that the addressee is not able to influence the narrator is exactly why he/she may be writing to them. In such cases, the narrator is simply seeking for someone to whom he/she can confess without having the attendant embarrassment at having to see him/her afterward or having to read his/her unsolicited response. Writing his/her tale in the form of a letter becomes a kind of narrative therapy wherein the narrator can unburden him/herself to someone without any repercussions, judgement or unwelcome advice. This is clearly what motivates Charlie, the narrator of Steve Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), to write to his unidentified addressee. Charlie is an awkward adolescent reeling from the death of a friend and struggling to fit in in high school. He writes letters to someone he addresses as “Dear friend”, but who this is and whether he even knows this

person well is unclear. The first letter begins with: “I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn’t try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have” (1). It would seem that Charlie has chosen to write to someone with integrity whom he believes will be receptive to his letters and will not read them with a disapproving attitude. However, Charlie does not identify himself (he uses a pseudonym) and leaves no return address, so he is not seeking for a response of any kind. His letters are records of typical adolescent anxieties and failures, many of which stem from a secret that Charlie alludes to occasionally.⁴ He finally reveals that he was molested by his aunt whom he had loved and that he had suffered from a mental breakdown when he recalled the abuse he had been suppressing. The traumatic nature of Charlie’s revelations explains why he has chosen to remain anonymous to the person to whom he is pouring out the most intimate and painful details of his life. The use of the epistolary mode demonstrates his need to tell *someone* what he has experienced but he does not want the addressee to tell him anything in return. This is unusual since the epistolary mode is associated with reciprocity. Altman notes that “it is the hallmark of epistolary language in general to make statements in order to elicit a response from a specific addressee. To write a letter is not only to define oneself in relationship to a particular *you*; it is also an attempt to draw that *you* into becoming the *I* of a new statement” (122). Charlie, however, does not do this because the purpose of his letters is not to sustain a relationship but merely to feel as though someone is listening to him. Cathy Caruth emphasises that reading about trauma in texts is similar to psychoanalysis since, like a therapist, the reader “listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness” (*Unclaimed Experience* 9). Charlie’s writing thus has a therapeutic function, with his addressee – and thus the external reader too – in the position of listener. For Charlie, there is a paradoxical feeling of safety in revealing something intimate to someone who does not know you. This paradox is highlighted in his salutation at the end of each letter, “Love always,” which suggests closeness even though the addressee does not know who Charlie really is.

Whether the addressee influences the veracity of the narrator’s letter, shapes the actions of the narrator or is merely a sounding board for a narrator desiring to confess to another, it is always the narrator’s voice that sustains the external reader’s attention. This is a voice that

⁴ In his letters Charlie describes his insecurities, his loneliness, his relationships with his siblings and parents, drinking parties with a group of seniors he befriends, his first infatuation with a girl, a failed attempt at intercourse and a homosexual friend’s suicide.

reveals its feelings about events and, usually, awaits a response to the expression of these feelings. The focus is often on these feelings and responses rather than the events themselves. This is why Natascha Wurzbach states that the narrative action in an epistolary text is character driven rather than action driven because the events are filtered through the personality of the writer of the letters (xix). Even though a letter is written ‘in the moment’, in the sense that it captures the narrator’s present thoughts, the events themselves have already taken place and the relating of them will be coloured by his/her perceptions. All epistolary narration can therefore be perceived as unreliable. Of course, as John Bushnell points out, “narration can be unreliable in any point of view, as long as it’s limited” (26). This infers that any first-person narrator carries with it the awareness for the external reader of the narrator’s subjectivity, for, as Bushnell continues, “when the vantage point is confined to one character’s consciousness, the narration is likewise confined to that character’s interpretations” (26). Epistolary texts that have only one letter-writer can be said to create a less reliable version of the truth but, paradoxically, it is the only truth the external reader is exposed to and it therefore presents itself as the truth. For instance, Balram Halwai, the narrator of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), provides the external reader with his life story from impoverished boyhood to disenfranchised servant to millionaire murderer. His rendition of his master is the only version that we have and, consequently, we can only see him from Balram’s perspective as a man who is exploitative, spoilt, selfish and detestable. When Balram eventually murders him and makes off with his money, the external reader’s empathy lies with Balram since it is his consciousness we have been inhabiting through his letters. In single-voice epistolary texts like this one, the external reader in a sense becomes a co-conspirator who is invited to understand only the perspective of the narrator.

Polyvocal epistolary texts, in contrast, can cleverly display the multiple interpretations and numerous subjective experiences of any given occasion. The external reader is less likely to identify with one particular character and more likely to judge one letter, and its writer, in the light of another. For example, in Tobias Smollett’s hilarious *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), almost every incident is related by three different letter-writers, which has an overall comic effect. Matthew Bramble’s hypochondria clouds his perception of every town the party stays in during their expedition of England and Scotland. What he perceives to be fetid, stale and unhealthy, his younger niece and nephew view as festive and exhilarating. The letters convey amusing character variances and provide a more comprehensive picture of events but also serve as a reminder that there is no such thing as a single objective truth. In

this regard Elizabeth Macarthur points out, the epistolary mode, thanks to its interests in multiple perspectives, puts into question the “possibility of objective truth or stable authority” (16).

The various interpretations of an event or experience, what Bakhtin refers to as the heteroglossia of the novel (263), contribute to the sequential unfolding of the plot. Sometimes not much happens at all and the letters may consist largely of ruminations, ideas and suppositions. In texts that consist exclusively of correspondence that does not describe things that happen but rather thoughts and feelings, these become the action. For example, in Daniel Glattauer’s *Love Virtually* (2012), a misspelt email address leads to a virtual correspondence in which Leo Leiker and Emmi Rothner first fall in love with each other’s writing and then, inevitably, with each other since they equate the writer with his/her words. Much of the later part of the novel’s action consists of anticipatory scenarios in which they envision meeting each other in person – an event that never takes place. In this text, the lack of ‘real’ action is precisely what sustains the plot.

However, thoughts and feelings expressed in letters may also give way to action in the more literal sense of the word. An example of this can be seen when writing and thinking about love lead to the action of sex. In Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684), Philander’s longing epistolary declarations of exquisite love soon lead to Sylvia giving up her body to him. Likewise, a long series of letters between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte in A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) precedes their extra-marital affair: the act of writing leads to the act of love. In Glattauer’s *Love Virtually* (2012) this does not happen, but, according to Alfred Hickling reviewing for *The Guardian*, readers of the novel so eagerly anticipated a consummation of Emmi and Leo’s virtual passion that they were dissatisfied with the novel ending without them even meeting in the flesh. It would seem that romantic plotlines titillate voyeurism and create certain expectations in the external reader who demands the resolution of sexual tension. That Glattauer subsequently wrote a sequel, *Every Seventh Wave* (2013), demonstrates the participatory implications of readership which influence the author behind his two letter-writers. In the sequel, Leo and Emmi continue their electronic correspondence, eventually meet and move their relationship beyond their computer screens.

Electronic epistolary correspondences like this have much in common with traditional paper ones, but they do alter the temporal valences involved in letter exchanges. Emails can be read instantly and a response is often so immediate that the spatiotemporal distance between correspondents may disappear altogether. Temporal polyvalence had always been a feature of epistolary texts because there was a time distance between events and the retelling of events and, with the posting or sending (via messenger) of the letter, a time gap when the addressee would later read about the events. It is implied that the narrator and addressee thus never share a present. For the external reader, however, as Altman claims, the “now” of narration becomes the central reference point (128). She argues that, even though the narrated events have already happened, a sense of immediacy is often created with phrases like “I have just returned”, “I’ll go now to see...”, which creates the illusion of a narrative present simultaneous with the events narrated and invites both the addressee and external reader to join in that present.

The sharing of this narrative present can be disrupted when letters are not in chronological order. For example, in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which will be discussed in the following chapter, the primary narrator, Celie, is punished by her husband when he withholds her sister Nettie’s letters from her. These letters are found later but were clearly written months and even years earlier. Her letters’ narrative present is so far removed from when they are being read by Celie that they heighten the sense of loss for the external reader too. Similarly, rediscovered letters written by the narrator can have a poignant effect as well. Although not an epistolary novel, Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), which explores the unreliable nature of memory, contains a letter written decades ago by the narrator, Tony Webster. Tony had always believed himself to be the wounded party in a love triangle that had resulted in the suicide of his friend, Adrian, but his own hateful epistle resent to him forty years later forces Tony to re-evaluate everything he had believed to be true about his friend and, more importantly, about himself. As an old man he is confronted with the embittered younger version of himself on paper, a self he now realises had unwittingly set off the catastrophic chain of events which followed.

Like Tony Webster, most letter-writers do not know what the outcome of their letters will be, nor do they know how they will be received or interpreted. In other first-person narrative techniques, the speaker often looks back and tells his/her story from hindsight, commenting on the lessons learnt along the way. An omniscient narrator may also create the impression of

already knowing the outcome or be an objective describer of an outcome. But an epistle written by a narrator who is innocent or under duress usually describes what has just happened and looks forward to a future which may or may not happen. In some cases their present is precarious, such as when both Clarissa and Pamela write under threat “of bodily injury and discovery of the fact that they are writing” (Altman 124). Since her present is filled with numerous fears and uncertainties, Clarissa and her confidant, Anna Howe, create scenarios which look to different possible futures. Ned Schantz states that this in turn leads the external reader to engage with these speculative fantasies (35). By far the strangest of these is the letters Clarissa writes as she is dying, envisioning herself dead. These last letters are intended to be read posthumously. In her final letter to Lovelace, which he receives after her death, she upbraids him for the future which he stole from her when he violated her. This mournful epistle becomes an elegy for what might have been. It also utilises the temporal valences of the letter to good effect for Lovelace reads it in his present, knowing that she wrote it in the past with a particular future moment of reading in view.

In contrast, it is noteworthy that epistles written by narrators who bear culpability for wrongdoings do not look to possible futures but primarily examine their own guilt regarding past events. Such narrators often revisit their crimes in order to make sense of them, explain themselves and seek forgiveness. After the deaths of their guileless female victims, the rakes Richardson’s Lovelace, Foster’s Stanford and Valmont all bemoan their actions and revile themselves. Not all culpable narrators express contrition, however. Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* has committed murder but the past crime that he describes in his letters is one over which he feels justified since he has been the victim of others’ greed and unethical behaviour all his life. The money he steals from his victim becomes for him a deserved windfall and he sees himself as merely receiving what is owing to him. His narrative voice is defiant and his letters are self-vindicating.

When a crime has been committed, the narrator’s voice may also be ambivalent. In cases where the narrator is unsure as to whether he/she ought to bear guilt or not, he/she may rehash the events leading up to the crime and every possible permutation of the actual event but may still not be certain as to his/her role in the awful event itself. For example, in Jostein Gaarder’s *The Castle in the Pyrenees* (2010), a chance meeting between two former lovers, Stein and Solrun, leads to them beginning an email correspondence during the course of which they revisit a culpable homicide in which they had been involved decades ago. Neither

is sure of exactly what had happened and they have different versions of the car accident and their attendant culpability. This leads to narrative voices filled with ambivalence. For instance, Solrun says: “I am not sure if you believed in your own theories to any great extent. And you said as much too” (218). Their differing viewpoints over their guilt and the spiritual meaning of what they witnessed lead to the crumbling of their relationship and their later email correspondence shows the extent to which narrators uncertain of their culpability are robbed of closure. The same is true for Eva, the narrator of Lionel Shriver’s 2003 novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, which will be discussed in chapter four. As the mother of a murderer, she can never be entirely certain of her contribution towards her son’s crime and her letters to his now-deceased father examine their family’s past in a futile attempt to make sense of their unbearable present.

Epistles with ambivalent voices demonstrate that letters do not necessarily bring about closure even though the process of writing may be an attempt to put to rest issues that are unresolved. In the case of undetermined culpability, closure is elusive. MacArthur argues that the epistolary mode in general also does not lend itself to closure because correspondences seldom end altogether and that there is an open-endedness inherent to the form (17). Most letters end with the suggestion that the recipient should respond or with the idea that the correspondence will continue, even if the external reader is reading the last letter in the novel. Polyvocal epistolary texts imply that correspondence is a continuous process and that even the ending of the novel could indicate a new beginning wherein the story will continue. According to MacArthur, the “openness of the epistolary form creates an interest in the real process of making meaning and the questioning of the moral and political status quo” (18). This suggests that the lack of closure serves a purpose wherein there are no conclusive answers or final truths.

Similarly, the epistolary form can also demonstrate that the narrating self is not necessarily a closed, singular, static or changeless entity. As letter correspondences progress, the narrator often develops and may also alter according to, or under the influence of, whomever he/she is addressing. Epistles are by nature social instruments demonstrating connection – or the desire to connect – with others. In polyvocal epistolary texts, these connections and the developments between them may differ and destabilise any notions of the self as a single, uncomplicated, unchanging entity. Hallet notes that the

social self is lodged within a network of others and this destabilisation can free up other seemingly fixed notions: if the writing self is seen to be multiple, so can the reading self be seen as a sequential series, as letters are read, re-read, the immediacy diluted and remembered rather than necessarily experienced in the here-and-now. (115)

This shows that the narrator is not only the writer of letters but also the reader of the letters he/she receives, and that his/her reading self will also be altered by correspondence and by re-readings of letters. This is seen in *The Color Purple* when Celie reads her sister Nettie's letters and these have a profound influence on her self-perception, as will be seen in the next chapter. Clarissa also refers to rereading the letters of her family and her friend Anna, copying out her own letters, reusing them and even summarising letters she had written to another addressee within letters to a different addressee. For example, she tells Anna that she wrote to Lovelace and then adds: "His letters and the copy of mine to him, shall soon attend you. Till when, I will give you the substance of what I wrote him yesterday" (Letter XIII, Volume 2). This rewriting and rereading of others' and her own letters leads to Clarissa constantly re-engaging with not only the people in her past but with her past writing self.

Despite the engagement with memories of her previous self, the ending of each of Clarissa's letters does attempt to place the writing self in the here-and-now. This is seen in each salutation wherein she "situate[s] [her]self on an emotional map, to summarise [her] present psychological state and attitude towards the person to whom [she] is writing" (Altman 146). For instance, she ends a letter to her vindictive sister with "your injured sister" (Letter VI, Volume 2), to her friend Anna she closes with "your miserable Clarissa" (Letter L, volume 6) and to her father, just before her death, she bids farewell with "your now happy daughter" (Letter XIV, Volume 9). Each of these epistolary terminations tells the external reader how Clarissa is feeling as well as how she sees herself in relation to the addressee. The self-definition in the salutation places a stamp of the present moment onto the narrator's writing self. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva also ends some of her letters to her deceased husband with a greeting summarising her feelings in the present. When one considers that Franklin is dead and that her letters mainly focus on what happened in their shared past, then her definitions of herself in relation to him in the present – such as "Happy New Year, my dear, Eva" (168) and "forever your loving wife, Eva" (468) – carry a particular pathos.

These self-definitions in the present portray an orientation vis-à-vis the addressee. Usually these show a connection with the addressee but sometimes also demonstrate a desire to draw deliberate boundaries between the narrating self and the addressee. For example, when greeting Lovelace, Clarissa formally writes her name and surname rather than suggesting any kind of relationship with him as using the word “your” would do. The content of Clarissa’s letters also demonstrates how letters can be used to connect or separate people. Her letters to Anna and her old nurse, Mrs Norton, maintain the intimacy between them, whilst she writes to Lovelace as a way of keeping him distant and apart from herself. Any letter exchange is an emblem of separation since absence is what necessitates writing. However, in the seduction plot, this distance is desirable and the letters to the men bulwark it and delineate boundaries. The letters between Lovelace and Clarissa not only demonstrate physical distance, because, as Altman suggests, there is also a “moral distance between sender and receiver to emphasise the difficulties of communication between the sacred and profane” (26).⁵

In the case of polyvocal epistolary novels like *Clarissa* it is up to the external reader to create a gestalt out of all the different correspondences. Altman confirms that the fragmentary nature of letters (each letter is only a part of the story) “encourages the creation of a compensating coherence and continuity” (187). Since there is no omniscient narrator, the external reader will find him/herself in a position where he/she knows more than the individual letter-writers or knows more than they are revealing in their letters. For example, when Randolph Ash in *Possession* writes to his frigid but loving wife Ellen about local history and his geological finds while in Yorkshire, the external reader knows that he is there with his lover Christabel Lamotte (262-264). We know what he is not telling Ellen and we know the reason for his selective revelations since we are privy to all the other correspondences. The position of the external reader can thus be seen as that of a kind of “Super-reader”, a term used by Altman to refer to a character who reads the letter exchanges of other characters (94). In some polyvocal epistolary novels there are correspondences between two letter-writers which have been stolen or intercepted and read by a third person for whom the letter is not intended. This reader spies on others’ correspondences and is thus aware of all the secrets and relationship dynamics between a potential range of correspondents. The external reader is always placed in this position of awareness in polyvocal texts but is also aware of

⁵ A didactic novel uses this moral distance between different letter-writers as part of its message. In a polyvocal epistolary novel, the order and juxtaposition of the various letters become an important tool in tracing the moral stances of their narrators. For example, in Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan* (1794), the deceitful plotting in the letters of the titular Lady is revealed by their placement amongst the frank letters of other characters.

the internal Super-reader should there be one. For instance, when Lovelace intercepts Clarissa's letters to Anna, the external reader knows that he is reading them and using the information gleaned from them in his seduction plot, before returning the letters to their hiding place. We also know when he has stolen one of Anna's letters warning the unknowing Clarissa that she has just found out that Lovelace is keeping her in a house of ill repute and we know that he has faked Anna's handwriting and replaced this letter with one of his own construction. Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons* similarly purloins the letters of others and uses them to his own ends. This creates a dramatic irony for the external reader for we are drawn into the conspiracies and will, in all likelihood, empathise with the victims of the epistolary duplicities. Judith Gardiner agrees, stating that the epistolary mode encourages an "empathic reading strategy" since it "attempts to address differences between people directly and feelingly through emotional resonances and lacunae, in a way that puts the responsibility not on the text but on the reader for understanding the emotional stakes and consequences of these differences and so beginning to act on them" (104). When letters are purloined, misused and faked, the external reader is conscious of their abuse and the differences between the innocent addressee and the reproachable epistolary thief.

Contrasts between letter-writers also stimulate differing emotional responses in the external reader when the author employs credible characterisation through orthography. When the various narrators have idiosyncratic writing styles, the external reader may experience disparate levels of empathy, amusement and/or identification. For instance, in *The Color Purple* Celie's childlike style accurately reflects her dismal education as well as lack of insight into her trauma, whereas her more sophisticated sister, Nettie, displays her intellectual discernment through her fairly formal erudition. For the external reader, Celie's voice is the more compelling. Other polyvocal texts may use this characterisation through orthography to comic effect. For example, in Wilkie Collins' 1868 detective epistolary novel *The Moonstone*, various witnesses provide their testimonies of their experiences regarding the disappearance of a fabulous jewel in letters and journal entries. While some of the eyewitness accounts are rather dull and perfunctory, the accounts of two key witnesses, Gabriel Betteredge and Miss Clack, are extremely humorous – not because what they relate is amusing but because their characters imbue the retelling with a comical aspect. Miss Clack is a fanatical Puritan intent upon converting everyone to her serious views through disseminating religious tracts. Her petty, judgemental voice is contrasted to the gravitas of a situation involving theft, drug use and murder and thus provides for satirical comic relief. Betteredge's tendency towards

circumlocution and discussion of tangential issues also creates humour in what would otherwise be a rather boring detective story.⁶

The voice of the narrator is thus crucial to stimulating the external reader's emotional response to him/her. For the internal reader of the text his/her emotional response to the narrator may even extend to the physical letter he/she has received since it can stand in for their physical intimacy. There is a strong metonymical element to many epistolary texts wherein the letter comes to represent the body of the person who sent it. For example, in *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*, Silvia tells Philander: "I drew your last Letter from my Bosome; and often kist it" (14). Clare Brant says that "lovers who press letters to their breast make paper simulate skin in an adult erotic desire to incorporate the beloved" (110). Embracing the epistle thus often precedes embracing the object of one's passion. Likewise, to the seducer, obtaining the letters of his intended victim is often the first step in claiming her body and stealing her letters hence prefigures the theft of her virginity. The victim may also see her letters as representative of her own body. After Clarissa is raped, she scribbles on scraps of paper which she tears up and throws away. Kauffmann sees this as an analogy for her violation in which Clarissa hopes "to tear, to shred, to blot out the existence of both her body and letters" (*Discourses* 141). Clarissa further equates her letters with her body when she bequeaths both her corpse and her letters to Anna. Her body also leaves its physical trace on her post-violation letters which contain smudges and tear stains. These literally mark her writings with the body's symbols of distress. The trauma her body has suffered has led to internal turbulence seen in her bad handwriting, described by Mrs Lovick as "not like her own fine one [...] but larger, and the lines crooked" (Letter LXI, Volume 8). In addition, her style in these letters is disjointed and erratic, which, as Kauffmann explains, "corresponds to the fragmentation of the writer" (*Discourses* 141). Her clipped, almost

⁶ Collins successfully advanced characterisation through the letter-writers' diverse styles, as did Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, the authors of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (2008), who used the orthographies of their various letter-writers to touching effect. Each epistolary narrator has a unique voice capturing the eccentric, the mournful and the courageous through dissimilar mannerisms, contrasting levels of formality and brevity or long-windedness. The result is a collection of lovable characters who are all different and easy to identify from their writing styles. This effectively creates humour but not irreverently so. Rather, it adds to the poignancy of the novel which is about the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands and the deprivations the locals consequently endured. The diverse characters create manifold perspectives on these events but this assortment of views would not have been believable had their writing styles not differed. This is largely why Jessica Brockmole's *Letters from Skye* (2013) fails. The two letter-writers – a young woman writer from Skye and a young American man who has read her novels – have indistinguishable writing styles. The assertion that they fall in love with each other through their writing therefore miscarries and the lack of characterising voice leads to lack of credibility for the external reader.

incoherent phrases lack the eloquence of her earlier letters, demonstrating through her writing the effect of the body's trauma on the psyche.

In numerous epistolary texts trauma is also due to separation and isolation, with the letters becoming emblematic of the narrator's confinement. Heloise – relegated to the nunnery after her elopement is discovered – and the Portuguese Nun – abandoned by her faithless lover – are secluded in their cloisters. In de Montesquieu's 1721 *Persian Letters*, Usbek's wives and concubines write to him from the constrained space of the seraglio. Pamela and Clarissa are literally imprisoned in their rooms and both attempt to escape from their detention. Letters sent from a place of confinement usually highlight the isolation of the narrator and her corresponding desire to maintain a connection with another, be it an absent male lover, a family member or a dear female friend. Schantz argues that “the cultural insistence on confined space emerges in direct proportion to the manifest range or intensity of female networking” (2). In other words, where patriarchy aims to suppress and control women, it also aims to break their bonds with each other and to confine them to the domestic realm as much as possible. This is most obviously seen in Mr___, Celie's abusive husband in *The Color Purple*, who not only banishes her sister Nettie but also steals her letters to her and restricts her movements out of the home.

Instinctively, Mr___ realises that sisterhood is a threat to his absolute power within the home. However, sisterhood of a different kind will eventually destroy his hold over Celie's self-concept and cause her to leave their home in her search for freedom. It is Celie's step-daughter-in-law Sophia and Mr___'s lover Shug who act as role models for self-determination. ‘Sisterhood’ thus constitutes an ideology of common femaleness that forms the basis for women's survival in a patriarchal world (a notion which has also been challenged by many feminist scholars and activists for its erasure of difference). Letters are a way to maintain these sisterly bonds, especially when women are deliberately severed from each other. Sometimes, the physical disunion is self-imposed precisely because they value their connections and want to protect each other. For example, the pregnant Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette* feels compelled out of shame to hide in a hotel when she has to give birth out of wedlock. It is her belief that her mother and female friends will be contaminated by being publically associated with her fallenness. Social proscriptions separate her from her mother and female friends and she dies utterly alone in a tiny room, with her last letters to them the only breach of these divisions. Claire Pettengill says of *The Coquette* that “the bonds of

female friendship – theoretically sacred, practically fraught with tension – shape Eliza’s thoughts and actions” (186), and it is through her epistles that these bonds are preserved. Similarly, Clarissa and Anna do not see each other at all during the course of Clarissa’s captivity (first in her parents’ home and then in Lovelace’s custody), but their correspondence conserves their connection. So close are they that they write with what Schantz terms a “rhetoric of intimacy” wherein their language is “saturated with terms of sharing and merging on almost every rhetorical level imaginable” (38). Anna writes to Clarissa: “Let your Anna Howe obey the call of that friendship which has united us as one soul and endeavor to give you consolation” (Letter XXIII, Volume 4), whilst Clarissa tells her that they share “[t]hat sweet familiarity, which is one of the indispensables of the sacred tie by which your hart and mine are bound in one” (Letter XLV, Volume 2).

Interestingly, Clarissa’s statement that “[t]he more than sisterly love which has for years uninterruptedly bound us together as one mind” (Letter LXI, Volume 7) also reveals a theme found in a number of epistolary texts: sometimes biological bonds fail. Clarissa’s real sister is part of the family group that is attempting to bend her to their wills and force her to marry a man whom she detests. Her mother also turns her back on her and it is her childhood nurse, Mrs Norton, and the woman who nurses her in her final illness, Mrs Lovick, who step in as mother figures. Mrs Lovick gets to pronounce the final words on Clarissa, as if Richardson is making the didactic point that good mothers will not be censured and that loving surrogate mothers are preferable to biological ones who are estranged from their children. The state of motherhood and the act of mothering are not necessarily the same thing or are shown in a number of epistolary texts to be interrelated in a complex way. For example, mothers may be ambivalent about their children and their own roles as mothers, as will be seen in the case of Eva Katchadourian. They may also come to rethink their relationships with their own mothers; a relationship which can alter over time and wherein healing is possible.

Sometimes healing is not entirely possible because the mother-daughter bond has been dissolved by death. Celie can never reconstitute her relationship with her deceased mother and can only forgive her once she has come to full knowledge of what led to her mother’s emotional abandonment of her. Although there can be no restoration of the relationship, this act of forgiveness is therapeutic. For some epistolary narrators, writing to the dead is part of the curative process. In Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964), the eponymous narrator writes letters to both the living and the dead who include his family, his cheating ex-wife, her lover and

some of the great writers and thinkers of the past who have influenced his own thinking. Herzog uses these letters to express his pent-up rage and work through his feelings of longing, hurt and betrayal. Because letters like these lay bare the pain of the past, they stimulate, as James Daybell argues, “cathartic or psychological release” (187). When Herzog writes to the dead, he makes no distinction between them and the living addressees for he writes to them all as if he were talking to them in the present. Since his unfinished business is concerned with memories and all that still needs to be resolved, there is no difference to him between writing to a living person or a person who exists only in recall. The fact that his deceased addressees cannot receive or read his letters is not important because what matters is that Herzog gets to unburden himself with what he needs to say to them. Letters thus perform a “psychotherapeutic function” in which the “shadow figures addressed in them [are] substitutes for the real objects of the repressed feelings,” as Altman points out (41). This shows that letters are often more important to the narrator than to the intended recipient as they create an outlet for the narrator who gets to *feel* as though a message is being sent even when there is no one who can read or receive it.

Letters, then, are written with an addressee in mind but are essentially, according to Daybell, “technologies of the self” in the sense that they are “outward exhibitions of self-expression [or] representations of the outer self” (187). For, while a letter-writer may reflect an interiority through expressing his/her thoughts or feelings, he/she always constructs a version of the truth in the construction of this self. Patricia Rosenmeyer explains that this happens because the letter-writer selects what to present of him-/herself and may even engage in self-censorship. She adds that letters are thus always constructions rather than reflections of reality (5). This adds to the paradoxical nature of letters: appearing to be honest self-expressions yet constructed, written in the absence of the addressee yet conjuring up his/her presence, therapeutic yet also traumatising through the rewriting of painful memories, representative of confinement yet an attempt to break isolation, limited to the private realm yet revealing of the public sphere. These apparently contradictory characteristics are all evident in the epistolary texts that will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 3

Epistolary Healing in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

The paradoxical qualities of the letter mode made it an ideal vehicle for female writers wanting to explore women's private traumas experienced in the domestic realm, as well as how this trauma is informed by a collective history of abuse and oppression. In 1938 Virginia Woolf wrote that "the public and private worlds are inseparably connected" and that "the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (147),¹ an idea that would become a rallying cry for the second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. The postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, when considering these feminists' agendas in 1979, reiterated the point by claiming that "the deconstruction of the opposition between the private and public" is "implicit in all [...] feminist activity" (30). Because epistolary fiction is situated in the liminal space between the public and the private, it is a fitting mode for such a deconstruction. This chapter examines how two important women writers of the late twentieth century appropriated the epistolary mode in two of their novels to address issues congruent with their particular kinds of feminism. While both authors appreciate some of the aims of Western feminism, they recognise that it represents a voice with which they cannot fully identify and which is inadequate for expressing the experiences and concerns of all women. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979), originally published in French as *Une si longue lettre*, and which won the first prestigious Noma Award (1980) for excellence in African writing, promotes an African Muslim feminism. Her Senegalese narrator, Ramatoulaye, has a complex speaking position as post-colonial, middle-class, educated Muslim woman who is nonetheless a victim of residual patriarchy in political and societal structures and of the way in which Islam is practiced in her country. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), which was awarded the 1983 Pulitzer Prize, advocates a womanist agenda. Her narrator, Celie, is a poor young black girl in the American South who uses her letter as a means to express and come to terms with horrifying sexual, physical and emotional abuse; an abuse that overflows from generations of slavery. The two novels have narrators who speak with dissimilar voices and the texts champion different perspectives on feminism.

¹ Interestingly, *Three Guineas*, from which this quotation originates, is an essay on the link between fascism, war and patriarchy which is structured as a series of letters.

Nevertheless, both authors use their texts to explore private trauma which is condoned by societies with traumatic histories and where there is limited, if any, recourse to justice for women. Both novels demonstrate how the letter is used as a space in which to recover a sense of self – through communion with other women whose stories are also enclosed within these letters – and thus bring about healing.

Denying one's trauma behind the veil of secrecy – both from others and from oneself by not confronting it through bringing it to consciousness – does not bring about resolution. Judith Herman in her exploration of trauma explains that “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (1). The epistolary mode assists in this healing because the narrator confronts her own experiences when she describes them to another and thus moves towards resolution. Knowing that one's letters are being read sympathetically is validating and also contributes towards recovering from trauma. The epistolary mode therefore can also be linked to the testimonial process wherein a witness is required to give ear to the painful experiences of others. Dori Laub asserts that “[f]or the testimonial process to take place there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* – in the position of one who hears” (70). The epistolary mode invokes the presence of another and can encourage intimacy and healing through being ‘heard’ by the addressee. Herman confirms that, in contrast to being listened to, “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others” (133). She asserts therefore that “[r]ecover[y] [...] is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections” (133). This is seen in Celie who is, at first, cut off from others and is isolated by her abusive confinement to the domestic sphere. It is through the intervention of other women (with whom she makes new connections) and her letter writing (with which she re-establishes an old connection to her sister) that she is able to heal and empower herself. Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, has always maintained her connection to her addressee, her childhood friend Aissatou, through letter writing. For Ramatoulaye, the letters continue an intimacy which already exists and enable her to release and mitigate her sadness through sharing it on paper. In this regard she tells Aissatou: “Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain” (1). Although her letters function as “a prop in [her] distress” (1), they also recall a past that is filled with women's personal and collective hurt and examine the more subtle ways in which patriarchal traditions and religion collude to silence women and restrict their access to the public sphere in the present.

As an educated and mature middle-class woman who is also a school teacher, Ramatoulaye fully grasps her situation, first as abandoned wife and then as widow consigned to her home through the Islamic prescript of widow seclusion. She uses her position as narrator to critique, from within, the elements of post-colonial Islamic Senegalese society which continue to marginalise women such as herself. Ramatoulaye also writes to Aissatou, who now lives in America, as a way of coming to terms with the trauma of having been discarded by her husband, Modou, in favour of a second, younger wife, Binetou. In marrying without his first wife's knowledge or consent, Modou breaks the rules of Islam but also uses them to defend his actions. Ramatoulaye's resulting anguish is flecked open in her letter which unflinchingly recounts his betrayal and her reaction to it. She equates Modou's rejection of her and their twelve children to a "wound [which] continues to bleed" (57) suggesting the ongoing psychological impact of this past event and confirming that she has experienced it as traumatic. Her addressee has had similar painful experiences and has shared her place in this patriarchal society but escaped from it and rejected its constraints. As such, she may represent the ideal reader whose position we are invited to take. Since the voice of Aissatou's correspondence with the narrator is not heard in the novel, it is as though we as readers bear witness to Ramatoulaye's revelations much as if we were in Aissatou's position and we are given a privileged view into Ramatoulaye's world as she shares it with her friend. Kenneth Harrow says that the "reader's place is defined by this address of mature sister to sister, of Senegalese woman to Senegalese woman, and thus is brought into an intimate, private space created by Bâ" (ii).

The external reader occupies a different and more complex position in *The Color Purple* which traces Celie's move towards emancipation. This gradual liberation is reminiscent of the slave narratives of the nineteenth century in which slaves secretly learned to read and write, escaped captivity, hazarded many dangers and found a way to tell and even publish their stories.² Much like her slave ancestors, Celie is imprisoned in many ways at the start of the novel: by being black in Pre-Civil Rights America, by her step-father's injunction to silence, by the gender role stereotypes enforced through a male-dominated society, by her concept of tainted sexuality and by her rudimentary understanding of God, herself and her

² See William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates' *Slave Narratives*, which examines the stories of James Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, Sojourner Truth, William and Ellen Craft, Harriet Ann Jacobs, William D. Green.

abusive circumstances. It is in her limited grasp of her world that she differs most from *So Long a Letter's* Ramatoulaye. Celie's lack of education and dearth of parental nurturing are reflected in how little she understands of the dreadful events that have forced her into pregnancy and childbirth. Her failure to comprehend the meaning and import of the crimes against her (although she suspects that she has been sinned against) create a particular poignancy for the reader since he/she realises precisely what is happening to the young, innocent narrator. The external reader is thus placed in the role of interpreter since we have to infer what Celie cannot adequately convey. We cannot take the stance of her first addressee since Celie initially writes to a distant and authoritarian God. However, there are some similarities between the reader and the addressee, since God, like the reader, can only 'listen' to her story and not reply. Later on, Celie writes to her sister Nettie and we discover that Nettie has been writing to her all along. Since the two sisters' letters do not appear in the exact chronological 'space' in which they were written, the reader becomes an interpreter not only of the parallel chronology of the events affecting the two sisters but also of the effect that Nettie's letters have on Celie. At the end of the novel, the reader is included as addressee since we are part of the "dear peoples. Dear Everything" (259) to whom Celie addresses her final letter. The reader is thus invited to recognise his/her own Divinity much like Celie comes to the realisation that she is part of the Great Divine.

In her Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel, Alice Walker reiterates this as one of the novel's most potent themes when she states that it is the book's intent to "explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and the help of others, breaks free into the realisation that she, like Nature herself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine" (ix). Walker's pantheistic belief can be linked to her womanist stance which breaks away from a masculine concept of an authoritarian male-orientated universe in favour of a universal connection to Nature which is seen as female. Her use of the epistolary mode, long associated with the female voice, is thus a fitting one for delineating Celie's movement towards freedom and self-definition. In addition, *The Color Purple* uses a mode associated with the private to make a declaration of how everything in the universe is interconnected. Thus the clear distinction between the realms of public and private is questioned – for if we are all part of a spiritual connection, then spirituality is at the same time intensely private and inherently public.

So Long a Letter also questions the boundaries between private and public. Although the narrator is restricted to her home by religious tradition for the duration of her four-month-and-ten-day mourning period, she uses this time of reflection to bring to light that which is usually kept hidden in the realm of the domestic. Concerning the trauma that many women face in their domestic lives, Herman states, “the real conditions of women’s lives were hidden in the sphere of the personal, in private life. The cherished value of privacy created a powerful barrier to consciousness and rendered women’s reality practically invisible” (28). Ramatoulaye challenges this covertness and uses her private letter to publically critique the various factors that have consigned women to a narrow and limited space. In the process she examines the very large social and political forces that go far beyond Senegal – she writes about colonialism, post-colonialism and the interaction between the two which has created conflicting value systems that need to be reconciled within the modern African woman.

The massive changes that swept the world after the Second World War – the gradual disintegration of Western imperialism and the momentous rise of second-wave feminist movements being the most pertinent to this section of this study – were reflected in the literature of the later decades of the twentieth century. Whilst post-colonial discourse was to become a powerful force informing both theory and practice for previously colonised peoples, the primarily male post-colonial writer of the 1960s to the 1980s focused on the male experience of colonialism (and its aftermath), often depicting his female characters in stereotypical and essentialising ways. Eustace Palmer points out that male novelists like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o “presented the African woman largely within the traditional milieu, have generally communicated a picture of male-dominated and male-orientated society, and the satisfaction of the women with this state of things has been, with the possible exception of Ousmane Sembene, completely taken for granted” (38). Other critics have since variously defended, excused, denied or rationalised the inherent patriarchal values that infuse these early post-colonial texts.³

It is evident that in many cases the male colonised subject who had been ‘othered’ by Western imperialism further ‘othered’ their female counterparts so that a double

³ Solomon Iyasere, for instance, argues that the “impression of a male-dominated society” is a “superficial one” since it must be “set against the powerful female principle” (92). Wilfred Cartey sees the delineation of motherhood as critical parameter in African literature as positive (171). In contrast, Mohanty and Spivak critique Western discourses that homogenise Third World women as common victims of patriarchy without taking into account differences in class, caste, profession, gender, age, religious belief and ethnicity (in Irlam 76).

marginalisation of these women took place. Patricia Schulster goes so far as to state that the women are “colonised by their men” and that their subsequent “writing itself reflects the movement from colonised to independent” (369). Indeed, as post-colonial women writers began to give voice to themselves and their stories through writing, their texts exhibit this liberation process which continues to take place in the political sphere and the sociopolitical sphere of gender relations, child-rearing and marriage. Mariama Bâ, writing primarily in the 1970s, stressed the importance of using writing to bring about these changes, stating in an interview that:

It is up to us women to take our fate in our hands in order to over-throw the order established to our detriment instead of submitting to it. We must, like men, use this weapon, peaceful, of course, but effective, which is writing. (in Klaw 132)

So Long a Letter is situated in a post-colonial Senegal which faces the challenge of adapting to its new-found political liberation from France in 1960. According to Elleke Boehmer, “individuals living in a post-colonial context look for ways to define their personal and racial/cultural identities, and believe that writing is an integral part of self-definition and the process of historical reconstruction” (228-229). In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye reconstructs not only her personal history (childhood, marriage, motherhood and widowhood) but also the past of her country as it meets with imported Western education and its attendant values. Constructing a new definition of a nuanced self (implying the intermingling of cultures) becomes the imperative of a transitional generation negotiating the move between colonialism and independence. Just as her use of the letter mode combines Western and some Islamic-African elements,⁴ her work, according to Obioma Nnaemeka, demonstrates her “ability to transcend the rigidity of binary paradigms” (14) and is “situated at a point of convergence, a point of ambivalence where old and new ideas, old and new values collide” (16). Ramatoulaye expresses an acceptance of this duality, for example, when she discusses the importance of respecting manual labour in the context of many Africans desiring clerical work. While she agrees that “much dismantling [i]s needed to introduce modernity within our

⁴ Ann McElaney-Johnson argues that since Bâ had a French education, she would have a knowledge of the epistolary tradition. She contends, using Bakhtinian theory on dialogism, that *So Long a Letter* is in a dialogic relationship with this tradition and thus “manipulates structural constituents within an established genre” (112). Bâ’s use of Islamic invocations in her letter is an example of how she combines elements of her religious traditions with the letter format.

traditions” (19), it is clear that such traditions as artisanship are not to be completely discarded in favour of newly-introduced Western practices such as office work. Statements like these demonstrate that she believes that traditions should be combined with some of the positive attributes of transformation. The most important of these to Ramatoulaye is her proposed adoption of democratic women’s rights within a change-resistant androcentric religion and culture. She acknowledges that this is not going to be easy when she writes that “the constraints remain” because “old beliefs are revived”, while “egoism emerges [and] skepticism rears its head in the political field” (63).

What is notable about statements such as those above are that they use a discourse associated with the public domain. Usually, letters are written in the language of the domestic and express the private concerns of women who are relegated to this realm. In *So Long a Letter*, the domestic space to which women are limited becomes a site of resistance which is expressed through the language of the sphere from which they are excluded. Interestingly, although the discourse is a public and political one, the letter does not reject the importance of the domestic sphere. In fact, it is their successful management of the domestic realm, the narrator argues, which has proven that women should be included in the public arena. Ramatoulaye says to her addressee that “the management of the home is an art” and that “[m]anaging the family budget requires flexibility, vigilance and prudence” (66), suggesting that women’s strength, tenacity and skills within the home demonstrate that they possess the abilities needed to join the political sphere.

However, she is not blind to the fact that, having been consigned to the domestic realm for so long, women often perpetuate their subjugation. For example, she says that “the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, have already been demonstrated [because] [w]omen have raised more than one man to power” (64). Ramatoulaye is pointing out that, despite having the skills to rule prudently, women continue to be relegated to the domestic sphere and even support the men who place them in this position. In a sense, she is reminding her addressee, and herself, that women often collude with the very system that oppresses them. This is seen not only in the political arena but also in the realm of accepted religious doctrines which can be viewed as restrictive and oppressive to women.

Ramatoulaye uses the letter mode as a means to critique her religion from within.⁵ Her position is a complex one here: she condemns the elements of her religion that are (in her experience) oppressive but does not stray from its other precepts. This is seen when she emphatically states: “My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me” (9). This acceptance of her restriction to her home because of the enforced widow incarceration is a good example of how she goes along with the rituals of her religion. Yet, ironically, it is within this time of involuntary solitude that she composes her letter to another woman and this space of seclusion therefore also gives her the opportunity to reflect and write her critical appraisal. This paradoxical stance demonstrates that she reaffirms the value of her faith but also questions how it can be used to restrict and control women. Her examination of polygamy is particularly censorious for, although she concedes that Islam allows it, she is not fooled into thinking that men marry again for religious reasons. She scathingly tells Mawdo, Aissatou’s ex-husband who also takes a younger wife, that “for the sake of ‘variety’, men are unfaithful to their wives” (35). Thus, while concurring with her religion, she is disapproving of the way in which some men use it to justify their own desires. Rizwana Habib Latha, when discussing Bâ’s Muslim feminism, argues that the author is advocating a liberation for women within the doctrines of Islam which Bâ appears to be saying have been misused (along with indigenous customs) by the men in her society to advance their own interpretations and practice. Latha confirms that, in terms of Bâ’s African-Muslim feminism, “the struggle for women’s dignity and participation in public life would have to be based on an educated examination of the culturally-specific ways in which Islamic principles are interpreted for the purpose of subjugating Muslim women in African countries such as Senegal” (33). Bâ’s use of a letter-writing narrator enables her to uphold this complex speaking position wherein women’s liberation is not seen to be incompatible with their religion. Ramatoulaye speaks out against aspects of her religion but does so using a mode that is associated with public silencing. The novel is, however, intended to be read by a public who understand the private nature of the correspondence. The epistolary mode therefore highlights these contradictions and participates in them.

⁵ For a more extensive analysis of Islamic feminism see Shahrzad Mojab who argues that it can be seen as an Islamic alternative to western feminisms in which “Islam is the only authentic, indigenous road to gender equality and justice” (130). Shirin Edwin specifically examines Bâ’s expression of this in *So Long a Letter*, demonstrating that it also contains a syncretisation of indigenous West-African beliefs with Islam (273). Miriam Cooke examines how Islamic feminists have a complex speaking position and a multiple critique since “the individual’s goal is to remain in the community out of which she is speaking, even when she criticises its problems” (113).

The epistolary mode also captures the contradictory nature of ‘inner writing’ since the narrator uses the letter as a means to explore her very intimate and private secrets, yet shares them with the addressee. Whilst cut off from the outside world, she looks inward to an interior space constructed primarily of memories as a sustaining source of self-examination, which is seen when she reflects: “I have enough memories to ruminate on” (9). True to the epistolary mode, this interior space is shared with another so that her introspective analysis is opened up to examination by both the addressee and the external reader. Unlike a potential Western reader who may, as Christopher Miller argues, “risk subjugation of the object to a new set of Western models” (121), her addressee was raised alongside Ramatoulaye and has shared her upbringing at the Koranic school. Aissatou is therefore understanding and supportive of Ramatoulaye’s adherence to her religious beliefs and practices although, having escaped this world, she is situated to sympathise with her ambivalence. Aissatou becomes a characterised addressee/internal reader because her parallel experiences of polygamy and rejection serve as counterpoint to the narrator’s. Instead of submissively accepting her humiliating situation, Aissatou divorces her husband Mawdo – an act that the narrator admires even though she does not make the same choice in her identical situation. Aissatou’s mother-in-law had encouraged her son to take a younger upper-class wife because she had never accepted her working-class daughter-in-law and “lived in the past, unaware of the changing world” (26). In contrast, Ramatoulaye, who is from a higher caste than her correspondent, demonstrates that she has embraced democratic ideals and that epistles can be used to breach the boundaries of caste. Because their origins are different and because they make different choices regarding polygamy, as Ann McElaney-Johnson rightly states, Aissatou “remains distinct at the diegetic level” (111).

Seeing Aissatou as a reflection of Ramatoulaye, or seeing the novel as Nnaemeka does as an “exteriorisation of an internal personal dialogue” and “therefore a pretext for a dialogue with the self” (19) is in part a failure to note the ways in which the text fulfils many epistolary criteria. The addressee’s relationship with the narrator influences how the external reader interprets the letters and thus what we understand the message of the novel to be. Aissatou is the type of liberated and progressive woman the letter-writer wants her daughters to emulate and thus represents an ideal reader. The external reader of the text is invited to inhabit Aissatou’s position of witness and sounding-board, thus we are also invited to be the ideal reader: one who understands, sympathises and is able to make different choices to those made

by Ramatoulaye. Florence Stratton views Aissatou as Ramatoulaye's "alter ego – her other self or double" (142) – who has the courage to do what Ramatoulaye "ought to have done" (142). Ramatoulaye's choice of correspondent again reflects the contradictory nature of her writing since she has internalised her oppression but recognises this to be the case and writes to someone who has liberated herself from caste limitations, polygamy and a patriarchal value system.

The discrepancy between their choices regarding marriage is further highlighted through the use of the epistolary mode since letters always suggest distance and space. In this novel, this space is both figurative and literal. The letter would not be necessary if the writer and addressee were not separated from each other. With distance being a precondition for letter-writing, the epistle becomes a way of mapping out inter-personal co-ordinates. According to Janet Altman:

[T]he *I* of epistolary discourses always situates himself [sic] vis-à-vis another; his locus, his 'address' is always relative to that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one's co-ordinates – temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual [...]. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of the writer and addressee. (119)

This shared world is emphasised from the beginning of the letter as she reminds Aissatou of their connection which stems from childhood friendship and that "[they] walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity" (1). Their common experiences become reference points both for the writer and addressee and function as a means of grounding their relationship, the parameters of which have been altered by physical distance. Their letters then function to bridge the barriers of space. Aissatou now works as a French translator at the Senegalese embassy in the United States and is financially so well-off that she puts all four of her sons through university and is even able to buy Ramatoulaye a new car. Their shared education (ironically in the language of the coloniser) enables Aissatou to emancipate herself from the confines of restrictive patriarchy. Because she has a marketable skill, she can pursue a career outside of Senegal and outside of the marriage which she has left. Mildred Mortimer asserts that Aissatou "claims a new transient subjectivity located in a place beyond the patriarchal structures she has experienced in Senegal [and] she courageously accepts the consequences of displacement" (72). She is literally in a different place but has also figuratively assimilated

this place as a space which encourages re-definition of the self. The physical distance between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye thus reinforces the gap between their choices regarding polygamous marriage.

Letters reflect figurative gaps but can also create literal ones. Aissatou cuts off her ties to her polygamous husband through a letter which she leaves on their old marriage bed. In it she explains that she will not “bend [her] head and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses [her]” (32). She triumphantly declares: “I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way” (33). Here, the letter is used to break a connection rather than to maintain one. Critics have questioned why Ramatoulaye would include Aissatou’s letter to her husband within a letter to Aissatou since she already knows the content of the letter she herself has written. This inclusion can be seen as part of Ramatoulaye’s contribution towards what Shaun Irlam terms a “community of memory” (78). He notes the narrator’s persistent invitation to her addressee to “remember and consent to the recollections she recounts” (78) and draws attention to the plural pronoun in “[I]et us recall” (15). It is as though Ramatoulaye is using her letter as an archive of not only her own but also other women’s stories. The novel begins with references to the friendships of their grandmothers and mothers, and also includes in its relation of memories tales of other women’s traumas. For example, Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou about their friend Jaqueline’s psycho-somatic breakdown as a result of her husband’s philandering. Since Aissatou already knows what happened to their friend, and already knows the content of her own letter enclosed within Ramatoulaye’s letter, these retellings are included as part of a repository for what Benedict Anderson terms a “collective memory” which is crucial in the “construction of any [...] community” (in Irlam 78). Ramatoulaye appears to be using her letter to gather the collective memories and thus (her)stories of women in a society which often condones (and thus silences) the injustices that men commit against them. Hence Aissatou’s letter of rejection to her husband is included as a document of refusal as well as a part of a collective women’s history.

Another document that demonstrates a refusal to comply with injustice is included when Ramatoulaye reproduces a past letter of her own within her present letter to Aissatou. However, in this instance Aissatou did not know its contents and is now being made privy to it, as are we. This included letter is written to her post-widowhood suitor Daouda Dieng, kindly yet firmly rejecting his offer of marriage. She outlines her reasons for doing so and

they mirror her friend's in reverse. Aissatou leaves her husband because she repudiates his argument that his relationship with his younger wife is merely physical whereas his relationship with her is based on love. Ramatoulaye declines Daouda Dieng's offer because he claims to love her and only has a physical relationship with his wife. Essentially, Ramatoulaye refuses to be 'the other woman' in his marriage and to inflict upon his first wife the pain that she is so familiar with herself. In her reproduced letter she emphatically states:

[A]bandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family. You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change.
(71-72)

Both women write letters to men that sever their relationships with them. Aissatou's rejection of her polygamous situation elicits admiration from her friend and finds reflection in Ramatoulaye's later dismissal of a new offer of polygamous marriage. While the women's letters to each other sustain their friendship across physical space, and act as catalysts for change, healing from trauma and self-definition, their letters to men limit their access to them and create a barrier that prohibits connection. These reproduced letters-within-a-letter therefore also function as self-validating mediums for women in a society that continues to rob them of freedoms which men enjoy. Letters are associated with female connection but do not appear to have the same connotations for men as there are no references to men writing to each other, and, in a most extreme example of disconnection, Modou even has a heart attack and dies whilst dictating a letter to his secretary.

Female connections do not begin with writing, however. Ramatoulaye describes how her and Aissatou's grandmothers exchanged messages through the fence of their adjoining compounds and how their mothers used to argue over babysitting duties when they were children (1). These examples imply that women and girls constantly talk to one another and that the letter sent to Aissatou is the continuation of a life-long conversation. While speaking through a letter is a way of expressing the self and of preventing self-elision by being acknowledged by another woman, it remains a substitute for talking to the addressee in the flesh. The novel ends with the expectation that the two women will meet to talk person-to-person because Ramatoulaye writes: "Tomorrow is indeed the end of my seclusion. And you

will be there within reach of my hand, my voice, my eyes” (75). The physical presence of the addressee need no longer be metonymically represented by the letter. As is typical of the epistolary mode, the letters sent by Aissatou have embodied her up to this point.

Ramatoulaye mentions to Aissatou that her stamps, envelopes, handwriting and the scent emanating from her letters act as cues that are “characteristic of you” (75). Although the letter becomes what McElaney-Johnson calls “a substitution for the confidant and in a very real sense, the physical presence of the letter is a comfort in itself” (118), the letter writer looks forward to a time when this proxy will become unnecessary. This is shown at the end of the letter when Ramatoulaye asks: “So, then, will I see you tomorrow in a tailored suit or a long dress? [...] I will spread out a mat. [...] I would so much like to hear you” (94). The letter ends with the hope that there will be an end to writing and as such favours oral exchange as it looks towards the future of these two characters.

While the letter concludes with hopeful declarations about the future of women’s liberation, much of the letter concerns the narrator’s present. Ramatoulaye’s day-to-day struggle as she faces single parenthood becomes the focus of the last third of her letter. It is not strange that so much of Ramatoulaye’s letter concerns her role as mother. In many – if not all – cultures there has been a tendency to equate womanhood with motherhood, as if being a mother were a natural result of being female. Women are often expected to embrace motherhood and sublimate their own desires in service to their families. Deborah Plant applies this to Ramatoulaye’s character when she asserts that “[t]he greater portion of her physical, psychological, and spiritual energies were spent in meeting the expectations of her husband, her children, her ‘family-in-law’, and the laws and customs of her religion and society” (106). Ramatoulaye herself emphasises the primordial connection between mother and child and suggests that she possesses an innate mothering instinct. In doing so, she appears to comply with all the clichés regarding motherhood – that it is natural, filled with unconditional love and is characterised by an eternal indestructible bond. Yet, she also subverts these clichés when she shows how motherhood alone does not define her. Ramatoulaye does not subsume her discrete identity in motherhood or equate her importance with this role alone, since she often stresses her crucial role as school teacher outside of the home. Also, the “I” of this epistolary discourse has validated her importance as separate individual with multiple roles by writing a letter to a friend, a friend who put self-actualisation before self-elision as wife and mother. The epistolary mode thus enables the narrator to hold contradictory positions regarding motherhood quite comfortably.

It also enables her to critique other mothers from her own position as mother writing to another mother. From inside this private correspondence she does not perpetuate the idea that all mothers put their children first. Latha says that this is seen in Ramatoulaye's description of her young co-wife Binetou's mother's attempt to "profit materially from customary laws and to thwart her own daughter's educational and personal progress" (35). In the depiction of Lady Mother-in-Law we see the generalised romantic notion of the self-effacing mother stripped away. Although one may argue that her low-caste position prompts her self-interested aspirations (and that she is therefore also a victim), Klaw asserts that Bâ uses this character to "call into question a mother's supremacy and show with specific examples the ways in which a mother often abuses respect. Bâ disproves two societal givens: that a mother must put her role as mother above all else and that a mother can do no wrong" (144). While claiming to have their daughters' interests at heart, their actions often belie this and show that mothers can collude with, and thus help to sustain, the systems that repress their daughters.

Ramatoulaye also uses her letter to debunk the phallogocentric myth so common in early post-colonial West African literature which, Alphamoye Sonfo argues, "often celebrates the African mother as radiant, fulfilled, and always welcoming life and man" (in Klaw 144). Ramatoulaye shows that raising her twelve children on her own is not easy and is made even more challenging by the post-colonial situation. As Islamic Senegal is in the process of transitioning to democracy and dealing with clashes between traditionalism and modernity, she faces the difficult task of negotiating a duality that is inherent in the type of African Muslim feminism that Bâ appears to be advocating: celebrating motherhood whilst agitating for the rights of individual women which are so often constrained by the expectations placed on wives and mothers. Latha confirms that "the confluence of feminisms within hybrid personalities is sometimes no more than an uneasy alliance, often leading to cultural conflict" (35-36). Ramatoulaye describes some events that have been particularly taxing for her as mother in a transitional society, showing how difficult it is for her as a mother to negotiate between African traditions, Western influence and Islam. By far her greatest mothering challenge is how to manage the discovery that her daughter (named Aissatou after her mother's friend) is pregnant.⁶ Ramatoulaye reminds her addressee that traditionally the

⁶ Similar challenges arise when she is distraught to discover that three of her daughters have been smoking – an act she associates with Western influence. She also disproves of her daughters wearing trousers as she feels that they do not suit the build of African women. While she has embraced many changes, and is thrilled by the

Islamic African mother of a girl who engages in pre-marital sex and finds herself pregnant is expected to rant, reprimand, threaten and turn her back on her wayward offspring.

Ramatoulaye refuses to play this role and instead acts instinctively: “I took my daughter in my arms. Painfully, I held her tightly, with a force multiplied tenfold by pagan revolt and primitive tenderness” (88). In a sense she makes a claim that the natural tendencies of a mother to nurture and protect are far stronger than the socially constructed roles and expectations. Although she does not equate herself with ‘Mother Africa’,⁷ she does show accord with the mythical dimensions of the primordial ‘Earth Mother’ – the giver and sustainer of life who has an unbreakable connection with the life she has created (even when her progeny has disappointed her greatly):

One is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. [...] One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end. [...] I realised how close I was to my child. The umbilical cord took on new life, the indestructible bond beneath the avalanche of storms and the duration of time. (87)

It is also interesting to observe from passages like this one a very different view on illicit sex, pregnancy and maternal disappointment to some other, earlier epistolary novels. These texts, particularly those with seduction plots, demonstrate that most mothers repress the maternal feelings Ramatoulaye gives voice to here, due to the expectation that refractory daughters have to be ostracised. In these texts the force of societal condemnation impacts on the mother-daughter relationship so much so that it ruptures their previously happy connection. In contrast, the same situation reinforces the bond between Ramatoulaye and her daughter whose plight elicits unconditional love, compassion and understanding which are seen in Ramatoulaye’s emphatic declaration: “I could not abandon her, as pride would have me do. Her life and her future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos” (87). While *So Long a Letter* endorses moral caution, it also rebels against the way women are held solely responsible for maintaining this moral code whilst men use the rules of their society to absolve themselves of blame. Although Ramatoulaye does not condone her

equality and lack of differentiation in gender roles she witnesses between her eldest daughter and her husband, she expresses a reluctance to welcome everything that is associated with modernity. For instance, she declares: “Suddenly I became afraid of the flow of progress. Did they also drink? Who knows, one vice leads to another. Does it mean that one can’t have modernism without a lowering of moral standards?” (81)

⁷ For an examination of this see Omofolabo Ajayi’s discussion of how “the archetypal African woman, a mother, is conflated with the symbolic Mother Africa” (37), a conflation that results in the African mother “being a voiceless and defenceless object” (38).

daughter's pre-marital sexual relations, she is angered that Aissatou alone has to carry the condemnation and consequences:

What was to be done to prevent my daughter's expulsion from school? [...] Ibrahima Sall himself ran no risk of being expelled from the university [...] while my daughter's swollen belly would point an accusing finger. When will there be a lenient law to help erring schoolgirls whose condition is not camouflaged by long holidays? (90)

These questions challenge the status quo regarding guilt and punishment and in the process highlight the broader guilt of a society that reinforces double standards, female objectification, repression and silencing. Ramatoulaye also explores culpability regarding her own experience of marital betrayal when she looks to various characters, institutions and facets of society in assigning guilt for the situation in which older women abandoned by their polygamous husbands find themselves. Since the epistolary text is first and foremost a self-expressive instrument, it is natural that she examines herself for any responsibility, such as when she says: "I try to spot my faults in the failure of my marriage" (58), and comes to the conclusion that she was innocent and gave freely and selflessly to her husband, their children and his extended family. She lays the guilt squarely on her husband Modou's desire for youth and variety, and uses the letter to expose the many ways in which he has betrayed her and their love for each other. In this exposure she is supported by Islamic precept:

The *Mirasse* commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed. These exposures crudely explain a man's life. (10)

However, Shirin Edwin contests that the *mirasse* is intended to "only disclose details of the material possessions of the deceased" (736), whereas the narrator uses her letter to Aissatou as a kind of personal *mirasse*. All Modou's crimes against her and her children are revealed to her confidante: how he seduced the young Binetou and, "to establish his rule, wickedly determined to remove her from the critical and unsparing world of the young" (11); how he used their joint mortgage to fund his new in-laws' trips to Mecca, buy his wife new cars, homes and jewels and pay her a monthly allowance; how he no longer provided for his first family or spent any time with them despite the equal sharing prescribed by Koranic law. Thus Omofolabo Ajayi claims that the letter "extends the boundaries of the *mirasse* beyond its

implied religious scope to the social aspect of the deceased's life and, by extension, all those he touched in his lifetime" (41). While the *mirasse* is a ceremony which is part of the Islamic post-death cleansing rituals, the letter as a means of confession to another also has a cleansing function, except that here it is not the narrator who has a crime to confess. The crimes against her are ritually laid bare through writing about them and this assists in coming to terms with them and healing the concomitant pain.

However, the sharing of painful memories has an ambivalent power and, as Irlam argues, "because of the double-time of memory – the repetition of the past in the present – remembering is as traumatic as it is therapeutic" (80). Caruth also emphasises that "the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be re-traumatising" (*Unclaimed Experience* 63). Ramatoulaye acknowledges that by recalling the crimes committed against them in the past she is forcing her addressee to relive the pain associated with those memories, saying: "I know [...] that I am twisting a knife in a wound hardly healed" (26) and "pain, even when it's past, leaves the same marks on the individual when recalled" (57). The use of the epistolary mode thus further opens up the concept of 'reliving' as the reader of the text is aware that both the letter-writer and addressee are writing and reading within the space of shared memories, some of them traumatic. The narrator's ties to the addressee and the collective, and the inter-generational memories she also refers to, cement Betty Thompson's notion that for African women "sisterly kinship is necessary to support themselves against the horrific assaults of society" (178), even though recalling traumatic events may be re-traumatising. There is the suggestion that this re-traumatising, through letter writing and reading, is a necessary step towards individual and eventual societal healing.

Bâ has used a mode uncommon in African literature to expose, criticise and suggest means of rebellion against the multiple marginalisations with which Muslim women in post-colonial Senegalese society have to contend. Uzo Esonwanne says that this leads to numerous and complex identities that place the novel "at the crossroads of an Enlightenment epistemology and Afro-Islamic customs" (in Edwin 727). Ramatoulaye uses her letter to demonstrate the intersection of her multiple roles: lettered and inspirational educator, loving and dutiful wife, nurturing mother, responsible daughter, devout Muslim, faithful friend, African French-speaking woman, upholder of traditions and assimilator of Western values. These multiple speaking positions are shown to be equally important and in dialogue with each other. The

letter mode demonstrates that the voice of the individual is not subsumed by her responsibilities to others, nor do her numerous roles rob her of dignity or identity. On the contrary, the letter affirms that within the interior space of writing to another, this nuanced personhood can find expression and experience healing.

While America is the destination of Ramatoulaye's missives and represents the world that gives Aissatou the freedom to define herself on her own terms and come into her own financially, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* portrays aspects of America's history that withheld these liberation processes for people of African descent. This epistolary text exposes the oppressive sociopolitical structures that ensue from generations of slavery and which find expression not only in terms of race, but also class and gender. The primary narrator, Celie, is a poor black girl from the Deep South who is sexually and emotionally abused, first by the man she presumes to be her father and later by her husband. The only person who loves Celie when she is a child is her sister, Nettie, who is cruelly separated from her by her husband Mr____, who then hides Nettie's letters to Celie as a means to punish both women. Believing that Nettie is dead, and in obedience to her 'father's' command, Celie addresses her letters to God, expressing the hope that He will explain what is happening to her. Celie's ensuing relationships with the tough Sophia and rebellious Shug (amongst others) provide her with models of women who have rejected victimisation and help her to see herself as more than just a downtrodden survivor. According to King-Kok Cheung, writing about these women "allows Celie to relive and rehearse their speech or action, thereby composing a new self" (161). In addition, when Shug assists her in finding Nettie's letters, what Celie learns through them gives her a better sense of her own history, the broader history of African-American people and racial relations throughout the world. Her realisation that God has allowed horrific crimes against her, her family and people to take place causes her to reject him as addressee and write to Nettie instead. The novel uses the letter mode (both with Celie as writer and reader of letters) to trace her development from dehumanised object to self-defining woman who speaks in her authentic voice and is able to constitute herself, through letter writing, as a subject.

Celie's letters also show how she progresses from a very restricted interior world entirely and forcefully confined to the domestic to someone with greater access to the broader world. Celie's father was lynched by white supremacists, she has been denied schooling, lives in poverty and is mistreated by her step-father and husband who themselves have been

brutalised due to their race. The layers of marginalisation in the novel are quite evident here. By writing from this multiply-marginalised space, Celie's letters are situated in her private female domestic world but illuminate the broader public hegemonic structures that are responsible for these limitations. According to Linda Kauffman, Walker draws on associations of the epistolary mode with female voices in a claustrophobic environment but she is also using the slave narrative tradition in this novel. Kauffman asserts that, since it was a punishable crime pre-emancipation for a slave to read or write, many slave narratives "record the slave's surreptitious attempts to get an education [...] and recount the slave's growing obsession with escape and the journey to freedom" (*Special Delivery* 190). Celie does both. Although she is removed from school due to her adolescent pregnancies, Nettie secretly teaches Celie to read and write. Her exposure to assertive female role models who teach her to fight subjugation and value herself, and the knowledge that Nettie is alive, raising Celie's children in Africa and planning to return to her in America, give Celie the impetus to leave her abusive husband and "enter into Creation" (180). While this emancipatory tale is certainly still situated within Celie's private world, Nettie's experiences as she travels to Europe and then Africa place the private world of Celie's domestic experiences within a larger sociopolitical matrix. Thus Nettie's letters – while sent in private correspondence – open the novel to public concerns. Even the outside of Nettie's letters contain signs of the imperialist exploitation that will be explored within her letters. There is a stamp with a "little fat queen of England" as well as "stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa" (109) which immediately place the letters within a historical context the external reader grasps. Hence, to Linda Selzer, Nettie's personal letters "provide the readers with a textual analogue for the novel's larger epistolary mode, illustrating one way in which the novel's domestic perspective is clearly stamped with signs of race and class" (69).

Nettie's letters also tie into the slave narrative tradition since she uses them to educate her sister. She teaches Celie about African history, African achievements, the effects of colonialism on the Olinka people, the polygamy and patriarchy of the Olinka and the attitudes of white Americans and Europeans towards both educated and uneducated black people. Kauffman argues that the use of the private female epistolary tradition and the slave narrative tradition are subverted by Walker as she "transforms both genres" through a "panoramic setting that encompasses the social, political, economic and global arena" (*Special Delivery* 190). In addition, the slave narrative tradition demonstrates that writing (and access to writing)

was used as a tool to exclude those outside the margins of power. The epistolary mode, with its constant references to the act of writing, reinforces the notion of writing as a form of counter-hegemonic rebellion. Valerie Babb agrees that “both Celie and Nettie learn to master the written word and to modify its form and function so that they, as black women, are no longer victims of the racial and sexual oppression a white, ethnocentric use of writing can dictate” (108).

Both letter-writers therefore use their letters to constitute themselves as subjects on their own terms. This constitution is a complex one since creating a radical black subjectivity in African-American writing necessarily involves the identity politics of a diasporic community. Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman argue that this entails moving “beyond ontological Blackness” that Whiteness has created in a “process of self-discovery and actualisation rather than a static reified artifact” (535). Walker’s use of the epistolary mode is an apt one for capturing this diasporic and evolving identity, since the travelling letter is fittingly symbolic of diaspora: leaving no address, Celie writes to God in part because there is no ‘home’ or physical address to write to or from. This is because, as the descendent of slaves, Celie has been influenced by generations of familial disruption, migration and displacement. America, therefore, does not constitute ‘home’. In turn, Nettie, the missionary, writes from Africa which is the source of the diaspora but no longer feels like home. Later on, Celie writes letters to Nettie in Africa which are never received and are returned unopened. Letters between the sisters cross the ocean but are either intercepted or unread. While this interruption of correspondence is a common feature of epistolarity, it takes on broader significance here since the novel is deliberately reminiscent of slave narratives – narratives which would typically explore disrupted family bonds and the need to find a safe and suitable address. When the notion of a home address is made complicated by mixed allegiances, the addressee can become the embodiment of home by providing a sense of belonging. This is especially true for Nettie who has an African genealogy, is raised in America, returns to Africa to convert the Olinka people to Western notions of God and identifies with the Olinka’s struggle with the colonialists but at the same time feels alienated from them. Like many African Americans who return to Africa, she is disillusioned to discover that it does not represent ‘home’ either. Tokizane Sanae argues that for Nettie her addressee Celie, and not America as a topographical or geopolitical space, comes to represent home. She also states that the dissolution of Celie’s diaspority occurs when she establishes *herself* as address and

addressee (100). This occurs at the end of letter seventy-six which she signs with her name for the first time and which is followed by the name and address of her new business.

In contrast, the first letter begins with self-elision, where Celie literally strikes through the words “I am”. This meta-fictional strikethrough forcibly reminds the reader of the process of writing and, according to Martha Cutter, also demonstrates that she has “no present tense subjectivity” (164). Yet, while she negates herself in the present, she rewrites it as “I have always been a good girl” (3), reinforcing that she is not textually completely deleting herself and that her past self has no reason to be ashamed or feel guilty. Celie’s restatement shows a complex relationship between the present abused self, the past child self and the writing “I” who needs to maintain a coherent sense of self. Like many victims of trauma, there is the desire to protect the conscious self from the horrific realities of abuse. Caruth affirms that trauma writing attempts to “represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the ‘unwitting’ traumatic events of one’s past” (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). Often there is a dissociation from the traumatic event which enables the victim to keep the self ‘whole’ and to preserve the innocence of childhood. The “I” that writes is aware of and preserves itself, even while deleting itself in the present, as if not fully acknowledging or fully comprehending the horrors done to her.

This uncomprehending innocence is enhanced by Celie’s childlike language which further reveals how little she grasps of her ongoing sexual abuse. Even for adults who have survived trauma, as Herman points out, it is “difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen” (2), but it is even more perplexing for a child to verbalise what she cannot fathom. The external reader, however, knows exactly what Celie is experiencing. John Mullan says that “we infer what she suffers through her inability to express it” (51). It is this inarticulacy about such horrific and traumatic experiences that creates a terrible poignancy in the text and leads to greater empathy from the reader. Like Richardson’s naïve Pamela, her innocence which is expressed through her limited language is entirely believable. Mullan terms such a narrator an inadequate narrator. While this is not an established critical term, I agree that it best describes the letter-writer whose lack of understanding renders him/her entirely trustworthy. There is none of the guile of the unreliable narrator whose letters are meant to deceive either the addressee or the external reader or both. Letters written by an inadequate narrator place the reader in the position of having to supply or interpret what the narrator is incapable of understanding.

In other epistolary texts, an admonishing or advising response from the addressee may lead to understanding or growing awareness on the part of the innocent letter-writer. However, Celie's choice of addressee for most of the text – God – sustains her inadequacy since He does not respond and there is thus no external source of enlightenment in the form of a real correspondence. Selecting God as her addressee increases the pathos for the reader since it is evident that she does so as a result of interpreting her presumed father's silencing injunction literally. His threat – “You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy” (3) – leads to her writing a series of confessional letters to an addressee who is absent and distant in a more abstract sense than Nettie in Africa. To Kauffman, Pa's injunction “demonstrates that discourse is a form of power since those in power police what can be said, thought and written” (*Special Delivery* 187). It is ironic then, that Celie chooses to write to a God whom she conflates with her ‘father’. When he takes away her child begotten by him, Celie tells her mother, “God took it” (4). A further irony is that her image of the God she is writing to is an old white patriarch such as that found in the “white folks’ white bible” (175). Unlike Ramatoulaye whose addressee is an equal and friend with whom she can identify, Celie's initial addressee is the ultimate symbol of aloof authoritarian power. Carolyn Williams asserts that Celie's view of God is a “culturally conditioned concept” (123) whose assigned racial and gender attributes need to be rejected in favour of a more interior understanding of God that includes herself. This happens later when Celie's lover Shug teaches her a pantheistic appreciation of the divine within herself (and all around her) so that when Celie writes the final letter in the novel it is addressed: “Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (259). Celie is therefore also indirectly addressing the letter to herself in a way that affirms her worth and interconnectedness to everything in the universe, whereas her first letters to an absent God enforce the reader's awareness of her partial self-effacement and excruciating solitude. Writing to God emphasises that she has nobody to write to and the fact that she does not even sign her name at the end of these letters indicates that she confers on herself the status of a ‘nobody’.

Walker's use of the epistolary mode here therefore suggests an inherent paradox, for while the letters to God show that Celie is initially alone and silenced, they also demonstrate a rebellion against absolute silencing and reveal a desire to be heard. Preston McKeever-Floyd sees Celie's letter writing as “a ritual of rebellion [and] the vehicle to [her] liberation” because it shows a “repudiation of the life she has been assigned and a desire for a more

expansive daily existence” (427). Her first request to God – “I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (3) – contains an implicit reprimand for a God who, through silently allowing the abuse, is not holding up His end of the bargain.⁸ Thus, even when Celie appears to acquiesce and adhere to masculine authority she is defying it. While the rebellion may be a subtle one in this case, the text manifests a developing sense of self and increasingly vocal revolt against mastery.

There are various ways in which this revolt can be linked to the author’s womanist agenda. Walker describes a womanist as “a black feminist or feminist of color” who exhibits “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” and who may “love other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (*In Search* xi). A key aspect of womanist writing is that it should be deliberately woman-centred. This can be seen in this novel in the emphasis on sisterhood, the valorisation of stereotypically ‘feminine’ activities like sewing and the retreat from heterosexuality. The eroticism of women’s love for each other creates a space where women are not dominated by male constructions of women’s sexuality. According to Linda Abbandonato, Celie’s lesbianism is “politically significant” since it “subvert[s] masculine cultural narratives of femininity and desire and rewrit[es] them from a feminist point of view” (1109).

Walker’s womanist agenda is also furthered by exposing how men’s language can inscribe, and prescribe to, women. For example, when Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie, he replies: “Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for–” (23). Mr____’s speech shows a masculine perspective of women that assumes that the power relations between them are entirely natural and that authority and the right to define lie with men. His language – both what he says and what he does not say – demonstrates his ‘authorship’ over not only Celie’s body but also her conception of herself. Celie does not vocalise a response to this but the thoughts that she writes down in the letter demonstrate a defiance of these assumptions: “Harpo ast me, How come you stubborn? He don’t ast How come you his wife? Nobody ast that” (23). It is noteworthy that the language of her thoughts, expressed in private

⁸ Celie also implicitly criticises organised religion in her letters. Although she never directly states that religion has failed her, there is the suggestion that the institution of the church allows violence against women by failing to act against it. Mr____’s first wife is killed on her way home from church and the members of Celie’s church do nothing to help her when she is pregnant at 14, even though her circumstances suggest that intervention is needed. Instead, the church members come across as judgmental. This is seen when Celie describes how they talk about Shug as having “some kind of nasty woman disease” and how they “look at [her] struggling with Mr____’s children” (42) but do not offer assistance or compassion.

in her letter, connotes questioning of the status quo but does not yet, at this point, reflect linguistic self-definition.

Celie cannot yet define herself in her own terms because complete self-awareness is not possible when traumatic experiences, such as the constant beating and marital rape that she suffers, are not fully integrated in the psyche. This failure to assimilate the injurious event and its meaning leads to a dissociation from the event itself as well as the feelings which attend it. There is, as Caruth explains regarding trauma, both a “knowing and a not knowing” which are “entangled in the language of trauma and the stories associated with it” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Celie’s explanation of her emotions when she is beaten shows that she still ‘others’ herself when experiencing trauma. She tells God: “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear men” (23). This construction shows the complexity of trauma writing since there is the denial of feelings (“I make myself wood”) in order to protect the conscious self, and the contrasting acknowledgement of the outcome of abuse (“trees fear men”).

This paradoxical negation and acknowledgement is also seen in how she uses language to define her husband. While their marriage is founded on dominance and abuse, she terms him Mr____. The use of his title denotes an aloof master-subordinate relationship. It is also reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts (both non-epistolary and epistolary, and most often written by women) where powerful men in positions of authority are not given a named identity. Molly Hite points out, for example, that the blank is also used in *Pamela* for Squire B____, the sexual predator. She states that this negation has “connotations of exaggerated respect, forced anonymity and suppressed speech” (127). Furthermore, the lack of surname might obliterate the identities of these characters but at the same time suggests that they are based on real people known to the author and who cannot be identified. This not only adds mystique to the characters but also places power in the hands of the author. Walker explained in an interview for the 2003 special edition DVD of Stephen Spielberg’s 1985 film version of the novel that the characters of Pa and Mr____ were based on her abusive paternal grandfather and father. She transfers the power of this kind of withheld knowledge onto her letter-writing narrator Celie, for the narrator possesses the power to control what is written and hence revealed about the other characters. Celie’s use of her husband’s title rather than his name or surname thus signifies his power and distance but also, as James Hall states, “ironically denies identity to the powerful whom she playfully

makes into objects of ridicule [with] titles of pseudo-respect” (91). While acknowledging his power, Celie also mutinies against it by denying him absolute control and by slyly poking fun at him in the process.

Language, and nomenclature in particular, is therefore intimately linked to displaying power as well as reclaiming it. This is also evident in the naming of Harpo’s girlfriend Squeak. The diminutive nickname is allocated to her because of her small high-pitched voice. What people are called inevitably reflects how they are viewed and also affects how they will be treated. Squeak is seldom taken seriously and is often spoken to in a patronising manner. This changes, however, when she attempts to negotiate with her uncle to get Sophia out of jail and he violently rapes her instead. Harpo begins to relate to the others what happened to Squeak but she interjects, saying: “Shut up, Harpo [...]. I am telling it” (89). The right to tell her own story in her own words becomes vital to her as a way of limiting the amount of power that had been taken from her. Moreover, she subsequently asserts her right to define herself by calling herself by her birth name rather than her demeaning nickname: “Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say” (90). It is significant that her assertion that she wants to be called by her proper name occurs directly after her rape. Her body had been violated and to prevent further violation of her *self* Mary Agnes affirms her right to determine what she is called by others. She boldly protects her name and in doing so safeguards her identity. That her story is told via the medium of Celie’s letters shows that Celie does not only share her own trauma with her addressee but also bears witness to the trauma of other women and transfers this witnessing onto the recipient of her letters. Caruth maintains that such witnessing implies that “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” and that “trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). Celie participates in Mary Agnes’ trauma by listening to her, but her use of the epistolary mode also demands that the addressee and the external reader listen to Mary Agnes’ story and engage with it as co-witnesses of her wounding.

Mary Agnes’ rape is but one example of the violence against women which proliferates in this novel. Mr____’s first wife is killed by her lover, Sophia is beaten to a pulp by the mayor and his men, Celie is constantly beaten by her stepfather and by her husband (both of whom rape her too) and Harpo unsuccessfully mimics this domestic abuse when he tries to beat

Sophia into submission. Sophia stands up to his beatings by replying in kind and describes how witnessing her mother's prolonged mistreatment at the hands of her father leads to her developing a fighting spirit, since "a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (39). Like so many other epistolary texts, the letters reveal crimes against women's bodies. While Mary Agnes is raped by her white uncle and Sophia beaten by the white mayor, the vast majority of depictions of male violence against women in the novel are within the black community. Walker has received a lot of criticism for these depictions and has been accused of creating a distorted image of black men. Trudier Harris states, for instance, that the novel is a "circus of black human interactions" and that it "reinforces racist stereotypes" (155). Critics fear that these depictions of violence confirm white fantasies and phobias. Given the history of Eurocentric writing which tended to portray black males as atavistic and governed by their primal urges towards sex and aggression, such concerns are understandable. However, Walker unapologetically chose to depict black domestic violence and sexual violation in a confrontational way (Celie's uncomprehending descriptions of what is done to her as an innocent child are unflinchingly graphic). It can be argued that to present a romanticised image of black men for the sake of black solidarity is a form of dishonesty. Other writers like Toni Morrison have also not shied away from an uncompromising portrayal of black male violence on their female counterparts. In some of her works, most notably in *Beloved* (1987), she links this violence and violation to the legacy of slavery. Emasculated by forced servitude, the male slave 'remasculates' himself by proving his strength and virility, thus his conception of masculinity, on a weaker subject.

While *The Color Purple* does not make the link between slavery and domestic violence quite as clear, the lack of African-American access to the American Dream and the corresponding racism that all the characters experience certainly hints at the role that racial oppression plays in the actions of these characters. The use of the epistolary mode makes the critique of such oppression more complex. The letters are situated in the private world of the domestic but despite this undertake, as Selzer claims, "an extended critique of race relations and especially racial integration" through "the development of an embedded narrative line that offers a post-colonial perspective on the action" (68). The private therefore reveals the public. However, Selzer remarks that other critics such as Lauren Berlant and George Stade disagree, feeling that the emphasis on Celie's domestic situation through the use of private letters has marginalised the public lives of black people. It would seem that as an African-American writer, the expectation of Walker is that she has to subscribe to an unwritten obligation to a

particular political agenda or reflect an accepted institutional history. bell hooks, for example charges that “the focus on Celie’s sexual oppression ultimately deemphasises the collective plight of black people and invalidates [...] the racial agenda of the slave narrative tradition that it draws on” (465). In a sense, then, the epistolary mode captures the complexity of African-American womanhood since it reveals the public through the private, but by concentrating on the domestic reinforces the notion that the personal need not be subsumed by a particular political agenda that seeks to sentimentalise the sufferings of all black people. The woman-centredness of the letter text is necessary to expose the brutality that black women sometimes experience at the hands of black men – a brutality which is often hidden behind a public façade out of duty to a collective interest. The private letters seek therefore to expose the violence and sexual abuse that is generally kept secret because it does not suit the image of black men that civil rights groups aim to promulgate.

However, silence regarding rape is universal and, invariably, the perpetrator binds his/her victims to silence and secrecy. Martha Cutter refers to the Philomela narrative archetype whereby rape is connected to “silencing and the complete erasure of feminine subjectivity” in a “violent inscription of the female body” (161). Like Philomela, Celie is violently subdued into silence but still finds a way to give expression to the physical and emotional harm done to her. Philomela, whose tongue is cut out, narrates her tale by weaving a tapestry depicting her rapist’s actions, and sends it to her sister. Similarly, Celie writes a ‘tapestry’ (in the sense that there are many different threads to her story of numerous women’s experiences) of secret letters in response to her stepfather’s command and threat that the knowledge of incest will harm her mother. However, these initial letters are not sent to another person. While her letters become a means to re-inscribe her body through the written voice by calling someone to witness what has been perpetrated against her, that this witness is God retains a secret confessional dynamic to her story. Confession has connotations of guilt and shame, and it is evident that Celie has taken on these feelings despite her innocence. Letters make the confession a far more nuanced one since they imply secrecy but also the need to share, even when the confessor is not actually present. In confiding her story, she emphasises her right to tell it and expose her stepfather’s guilt. Moreover, the language she uses to describe his actions clearly demonstrates his culpability from the start of the novel:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it

around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. (3)

“He” is the subject of every sentence whereas she is the object. This use of the active voice stresses that it is his actions that are inscribed on her body. However, in the final sentence, “I” is the subject and her “don’t never get used to it” implies that she knows his actions are wrong and that she resists his imperative to be passive.

While rape becomes the catalyst for Celie to begin searching for her voice through the medium of letters, in this passage it is clear that her voice is enclosed within masculine authority. The words she uses to define her own body parts are derogatory slang words primarily used by men to demean women. That she uses these words shows that she has no other reference point from which to articulate meaning. At this early stage of the novel, the masculine discursive violence has been entirely internalised and conditions the way in which she sees herself. This, together with her experiences as Mr____’s passive sexual object lead her to thinking of sex (and her role in it) as something shameful and dirty. She later tells Shug, “most times I pretend I ain’t there” (74) and asks her, “God don’t think it dirty?” (177). In response, Shug teaches her that enjoying loving, consensual sex as a gift from God is something to celebrate. She teaches Celie to see her own beauty, introduces her to the pleasures of consensual lesbian sex and encourages her to stand up to Mr____. Celie begins to modify her self-perception due to the influence of this feminine re-inscription. Hence the confessional mode of Celie’s letters makes way for celebratory retellings of her own triumph and growth. The most triumphant moment of the novel is when she stands up to Mr____ and verbalises her pent up rage:

You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need [...]. Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, us all together gon whup your ass. (180)

This time, it is Celie who is defining Mr____ in her own terms. She uses language to demean him and take back her power. Although she has been expressing rebellion through her private writing, this is the first time that she publically vocalises her rejection of his authority. It is

within the space of letters that she has rehearsed her voice, so that this moment represents merely the culmination of what she has been practicing in her epistles. Her dialogue with herself, God and Nettie is eventually shared with others and rings true since she has always written in the way in which she speaks.

In contrast, Nettie's missionary letters to Celie have been panned by many critics as less compelling than Celie's since her language reflects an educated writer who does not write as she would speak. They find her writing style stilted and the content of her letters less interesting. Sanae, for example, says that "Nettie's textbook-like didacticism [...] is incompatible with Celie's lively record of people's speech" (100). Celie mimics the colloquial speech patterns of the various characters whose stories she relates in her letters, each character thus speaking in his/her own voice through the filter of Celie as narrator. Her comments and reactions to what they do and say also demonstrate how they have affected her developing insight into her own situation. Shanyn Fiske calls this use of the epistolary structure a "layered first person narration [in which] a symphony of voices [is] at once discrete and intermingled" (150). The complexity of this mimicry belies any claims that Walker has used a simple-minded narrator who affirms white stereotypes about black intelligence. Celie's first letters may establish her as an inadequate narrator because she does not fully grasp what is happening to her, but she grows in her understanding of herself and others and ably reflects their idiosyncratic speech patterns and adds her own comments on their behaviour. She begins to understand her own emotions and develops perceptiveness about the motives and feelings of others. Her introspection is shown when she apologises to Sophia for telling Harpo to beat her: "I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't" (39). She is able to interpret Mr___'s actions in much the same way, so that she is even able to explain why he inflicts bodily harm on her. She tells Shug that Mr___ beats her "for being me and not you" (71). This development of insight on the part of Celie changes the role of the reader from one who has to interpret what she cannot articulate in her first letters to one who observes the narrator's psychological growth as well as the influence of other characters – especially female ones – on the narrator.

The unique yet interwoven character of each woman's story included in the letters cleverly links to the important theme of sewing – particularly quilting – in the novel. Throughout the text, women use sewing together as a means to connect with each other, patch up disputes, express their creativity and earn a livelihood. The structure of an epistolary text with more

than one letter-writer who each tells a number of other people's stories can be viewed as a 'written quilt' since these stories put together create a unified but distinctively diverse and colourful whole.⁹ To Walif El Hamamsy, "quilting and letter writing become synonymous acts, both based on a process of piecing together cloth and words" (168). It is also noteworthy that sewing, an activity associated with the female and the domestic sphere, gives Celie entrance into the public realm since it is through sewing that she gains financial independence from her husband and opens her own successful unisex pants shop. The androgynous nature of pants also demonstrates Celie's break away from strict gender codes.¹⁰

Sewing as affirming female activity supports the womanist approach of *The Color Purple* and functions as a metaphor for the connections of sisterhood. The bonds of women as literal and figurative sisters are the main sustaining forces for all the female characters. Sophia's emphatic "all the girls stick together" (40) as a means to survive the onslaughts of her father and brothers expresses one of the main themes of the novel. It is interesting to note that all the sisterly bonds in this novel take place in the absence of a strong mother figure. Womanist writing often attempts to trace a line of strength and tenacity through mothers and to create a surrogate line where this has been denied. Since Celie and Nettie do not have a mother who is a home, they become 'home' for each other. They have to find a home identity in their sisterhood since their mother is dead and did not leave them with an indelible sense of belonging. The identity narrative which is usually seated in the mother here makes way for one seated in the sister. According to Susheila Nasta, "images of mothers and home conventionally suggest one's origins: the start of one's being, hearth – the context of one's nurturing, and roots – the geographical and genealogical legacy that links an individual to people and places" (in Floyd-Thomas and Gillman 544-545). Celie and Nettie do not experience this nurturing from their mentally unstable mother who is so weakened by repeated childbirths that she "die screaming and cussing" (4) without telling them who their

⁹ Interestingly, Holly Kearl reports that the Monument Quilt project begun by FORCE (a creative activist group) in 2014 in the USA encourages women to tell their stories of sexual abuse on a piece of material. On 1 March 2014, these pieces were sewn together and the resulting massive quilt was displayed along the length of the Washington Mall. According to Hannah Brancato, FORCE co-director, "the quilt airs out emotions that are usually confined to private spaces". She adds that, "for individuals and communities to heal from the isolating experience of sexual violence, which is so often kept hidden, we have to create a space where people can express emotions openly" (Building a Monument, n. pag.).

¹⁰ Importantly, Mr_____ also changes regarding his rigid understanding of these gender roles. This is most powerfully seen in his learning to sew. He and Celie reconcile as friends and spend time "sewing and talking and smoking" (247) together. The novel therefore traces not only Celie's emancipation but Mr_____ 's as well. With them now enjoying a relationship of equality, Celie starts to refer to him by his name, Albert.

real father was. They grow up with only each other for comfort and support, and Celie thus becomes a surrogate mother for Nettie at the age of fourteen.

Not only is Celie robbed of a nurturing mother figure, she is robbed of her role as mother too. Her step-father takes her children from her and gives them to the missionary couple, Samuel and Corrine, with whom Nettie will later travel to Africa. Suspecting that her daughter might be taken from her as her son was, Celie sews her name, “Olivia”, on her nappy as well as little stars and flowers. This is the closest she gets to writing her daughter a letter. Inscribing an identity onto her nappy is the only nurturing act that Celie gets to perform and the loss of other such acts is part of the trauma which she processes and heals from through the acts of writing letters and sewing. Celie is forced to raise her husband Mr____’s ungrateful children for him, but it is clear that the longing for her biological children supersedes any loyalty to these children who do not want her as mother. The inability to mother and be mothered is connected to a lack of roots and home. The novel ends with Celie and Nettie reuniting and also with Celie meeting her grown children. Not only has Nettie come home to her sister, Celie is now able to give her own children a sense of roots and belonging. While this mothering has been delayed, there is a sense in which the kinship bonds have been extended beyond sisterhood so that the inscription of an identity can be completed for all of them. This epistolary text therefore ends when letters are no longer necessary, since absence and longing – prerequisites for the epistolary mode have been replaced by real, physical connection.

In this respect both texts examined in this chapter show resolution when the letter loses its metonymical function. Unlike many other epistolary texts, these novels display closure because the narrator no longer needs the letters to explore, come to terms with and assimilate an understanding of trauma and pain. For both *Ramatoulaye* and *Celie*, the experience of ‘sisterhood’ and the process of writing to a witness have assisted with healing. This is most powerfully shown in their ability to forgive those who have committed the worst atrocities against them. On the customary fortieth day post-death celebration, *Ramatoulaye* says of Modou: “I have forgiven him” (59). After Mr____ has shown genuine contrition, *Celie* says: “I don’t hate him” (235). Forgiveness is the ultimate sign of liberation for it frees the victim from the continuing psychological impact of the crime perpetrated against her. Both texts trace emancipatory processes as their narrators use their letters to rebel against the silencing injunctions of their patriarchal societies. Their epistles are written from within enclosed, confining and domestic spaces but have used these private spaces to expose the public

mechanisms that oppress women. Both novels examine how religion functions to oppress women within their societies but whereas Ramatoulaye upholds her faith, even while critiquing it, Celie rejects institutionalised religion in favour of a broader understanding of God and her relation to the Great Divine. Furthermore, both texts archive the experiences of other women and delineate collective histories of women's trauma but also of female connection as a source of strength. Both epistolary novels explore the complexities of motherhood as affirming but potentially also contradictorily challenging and painful experiences. Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, to be discussed in the following chapter, also explores motherhood by employing the epistolary mode but does not portray it as affirming. Rather, this novel shows it to be fraught with guilt, agonies and disappointments.

Chapter 4

Epistolary Mourning and the Ambivalent Maternal Voice in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, which won the 2005 Orange Prize for Fiction, deals with two highly contentious issues: school shootings in contemporary America and maternal ambivalence. Unlike the two novels discussed in the previous chapter, this unsettling epistolary novel supplies no comforting resolutions or hope for healing and forgiveness. Its letter-writing narrator, Eva Khatchadourian, is the mother of an adolescent killer who writes to her deceased husband, Franklin, as part of the process of mourning his death. Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, who initially writes letters to an absent God to give voice to her trauma and work through her pain, Eva also writes to an absent addressee as a way of coming to terms with immense personal tragedy and loss. The novel explores private loss within the framework of larger socio-political traumas, the effects of which resonate through generations who have been unable to eradicate the collective memory of the horrors of genocide and war. In addition, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* challenges archetypes of motherhood and its attendant values and supposed virtues. In this respect, the author takes on a feminist perspective which attempts to address residual ways in which women are still repressed despite the gains and freedoms that first- and second-wave feminism have achieved.¹ Eva's letters act as confessional documents which trace her sense of failing as a wife, mother and daughter. They also function as a type of narrative therapy which facilitates mourning for all she has lost. Hers is a complicated grief for it is their son, Kevin, who has murdered not only her husband and daughter, Celia, but also nine other people during a carefully planned high-school shooting which Eva terms *Thursday*. As the parent of a murderer, Eva is burdened with guilt over what her son has done because she fears that her failings as a mother may have been responsible for what Kevin becomes. Eva writes these letters as a way of exploring her culpability and posits that when one's child is indubitably guilty of a crime, self-absolution is impossible. However, Eva, isolated from society by her son's deeds, is also critical of society's readiness to heap blame upon the mother. As a result of these contradictions, her letters vacillate between self-exoneration and self-excoriation.

¹ Adrienne Rich's exploration of the institution of motherhood in *Of Woman Born* (1976) is pertinent here. In this seminal text she argues that motherhood is a patriarchal institution used to keep women under male control and that it has "ghettoised and degraded female potentialities" (xv).

Her search for a unified and uncomplicated ‘truth’ which will lay her struggle between guilt and innocence to rest is thwarted by the addressee’s spectral silence. There is no letter of response that will corroborate Eva’s version of events or provide her (and the external reader) with consolatory answers or another perspective. Consequently, the letters are marked by an uncertain and unreliable voice as Eva can only postulate what Franklin thought and felt, can only guess as to Kevin’s motives, can never conclusively answer the question as to her own culpability and cannot be sure that her memory of events is entirely accurate.

With her son in prison and her husband and daughter dead, memories become the ‘place’ that Eva inhabits most often. Unlike most other epistolary texts which show, Ruth Perry argues, “minds interpreting events as they happen, blind to future consequences” (120), Eva already knows the consequences (although these are not all revealed to the addressee and external reader) and looks back into her past in her efforts to explain what led to them. Two parallel stories develop chronologically through the sequence of the letters. Her letters begin on 8 November 2000, almost two years after *Thursday*, when she feels prompted to write to Franklin after she has a chance meeting with the mother of one of Kevin’s victims. She tells her husband about her lonely existence in her awful new apartment close to Kevin’s penitentiary where she visits him each week, and this begins one plotline: her new life post-*Thursday*. The ensuing chronological letters trace the development of her still-combative relationship with her incarcerated son as she attempts to move towards understanding him and his motives. This plotline, situated in Eva’s narrative present, frames the other chronologically developing plotline which dominates the letters: her memories of all the events that led to *Thursday*. She recounts how her Armenian family escaped from the systematic massacres by the Ottoman government in the second decade of the twentieth century and settled in America. Eva’s father later dies fighting in the Second World War, leaving behind a young son and a pregnant wife who is so traumatised by her losses that she never leaves her home again. Eva grows up feeling isolated and different to her peers and does not identify herself with an American outlook. Incongruously, it is marriage to all-American Franklin that brings her contentment and she fears that having a child will threaten her sense of self and sense of ‘us’. She recalls that, before she fell pregnant, she had listed all the reasons not to do so, one being: “Less time just the two of us” (30). In addition, her fear that having a child will curtail her successful career as a travel writer reveals how much she valued her independence and freedom. It is Franklin, the letters show, who wants a child and who believes in the wholesome ideal of the American Dream and the perfect middle-class

American suburban family (much like the family in which he was raised), whilst Eva is reluctant to change the status quo. Her subsequent unpleasant experience of pregnancy, Kevin's difficult birth and her inability to breastfeed him are huge disappointments because they fail to live up to commonly held and romanticised expectations about maternity, making her anxious because she "discovered [herself] to be monstrous" (92). The fear that she is abnormal because she can not bond with her child is not one she can share with anybody and it is only now, in her narrative present when Franklin is dead and unable to judge her, that she confesses these fears to him. In her account of her experience of raising Kevin she presents herself as having tried desperately to be a loving, attentive mother, for she had wanted to please Franklin by being a good mother. However, she also sensed that she was undermining these desires with her secret resentment of her inscrutable son and the voice that speaks through these letters is thus also an ambivalent one. When Kevin turns out to be aloof, independent, spiteful and full of simmering rage, Eva can never be certain as to whether these attributes are innate or a reaction to her maternal ambivalence.

Her letters make it clear that her doubts are exacerbated by Franklin's entirely different view of his son whom he perceives to be a normal child. Throughout Kevin's childhood Franklin refuses to listen to Eva's concerns over her son and so these letters present Eva's defence of her negative experience of raising him. In support of her 'case', Eva refers to other people, like the babysitter Siobhan who leaves their service because of Kevin's meanness (132) and the mothers in the children's playgroup who also avoid Kevin and start a new playgroup without him (222). These incidents appear to confirm Eva's suspicions that her son is deficient in some way but Franklin simply dismisses them since they do not fit into his neat image of his perfect son. Eva's and Franklin's contradictory experiences of their son and their inability to have an honest discussion about Kevin without it leading to conflict result in distance and suspicion within their marriage. Their estrangement is heightened by the fact that there are so many things that Eva feels she cannot tell Franklin, things that will further drive him away from her. Possibly the worst of the secrets that she kept from him and now reveals regards the time she broke six-year-old Kevin's arm by flinging him across the room in a fit of rage after he intentionally defecated in the nappy he is still wearing at age six.² In her narrative present, Eva thus uses her letters as a way of confessing all the thoughts and

² Adrienne Rich discusses maternal violence, positing that when mothers resort to violent acts on their children it is often the result of years of frustration, lack of support and the "insane expectations" that are placed on mothers (267). She claims that "instead of recognising the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological" (267).

incidents that she had kept from Franklin during their marriage. They also function as testimonials to the loss of her identity as wife, lover and travel-writing career woman – identities that are subsumed by an unwanted identity as failing stay-at-home mother. Eva, so aware of all she has lost in the process of raising Kevin, further confesses in her letters how she longs for a normal experience of motherhood and deliberately falls pregnant a second time. Celia is everything that Kevin is not, as she is loving and compassionate and craves affirmation and affection. Celia's nature may, however, not necessarily offer proof that Kevin is inherently malicious. It is impossible, for instance, to determine whether Eva's desire for a second child (in contrast to her reluctance to have her first one) influenced the formation of Celia's personality. While Eva enjoys nurturing her daughter and is rewarded by Celia's attachment to her, Kevin despises what he sees as Celia's weaknesses and plays a role in the incident which costs his sister her eye. As with other events related in Eva's letters, there is no certainty regarding Kevin's actions and motives when drain cleaner burns out Celia's eye, and Eva is never able to capture the full truth of what had happened between the siblings. These unresolved conjectures find their apotheosis in Eva's incomplete knowledge about what happened on *Thursday*. A devastated Eva is left to piece together the story of what she thinks took place when Kevin carried out his plan to murder his father and sister with his cross-bow, after which he had locked nine classmates, a teacher and a cafeteria worker in the school gymnasium and killed all but two of them in a rain of arrows.

In order to make sense of Kevin's crime, she meticulously scrutinises each memory so as to catalogue what could have contributed to Kevin's pathological make-up. Since this catalogue related in her letters is in chronological order, the external reader does not know about Franklin's and Celia's deaths until the second-last letter. We do, however, know from the first letter that Kevin is in detention for the school killings. The shocking revelation that Eva's addressee is in fact dead has contributed to a number of popular reviewers and readers of the novel perceiving Eva as an unreliable narrator.³ Readers felt that the author had employed the conceit of a letter-writing narrator in order to dupe the unwitting external reader into believing that the addressee is alive and reading these letters too. Since Eva's letters are written in the present tense and she uses ambiguous words that suggest that she and Franklin are merely living separately from one another after the school massacre, the reader

³ See, for instance, Henry Sutton's article "Top Ten Unreliable Narrators" in *The Guardian* of 17 February 2010, in which he states that the novel is "a postmodern masterclass in unreliability" (n.pag.). Kathryn Williams, discussing Eva's unreliable perspective on events, goes so far as to say that Eva "might be as sociopathic as her son" in her article "8 Insanely Unreliable Narrators" in "Barnes & Noble Reads" of 12 September 2013 (n.pag.).

is fooled throughout his/her voyeuristic engagement with the correspondence. Shriver acknowledges that the twist at the end was part of her writing strategy in an interview with Robert Birnbaum, where she says: “I did reserve something out. I think there is a structural obligation, if you are going to put the book together that way to have something happen at the end, which you don’t necessarily know about” (“Author Interview” n.pag.).

This surprise is not the only reason why Shriver’s narrator is deemed to be unreliable. Gregory Phipps notes that Eva’s “overt manipulation of the narrative shapes our perception of Kevin” (109) and that we do not have another epistolary voice to inform our understanding of him. Because Eva’s perspective is coloured by her experiences of her son, her voice cannot be trusted to provide an objective interpretation of Kevin. In the interview with Birnbaum, Shriver concedes that she deliberately set about creating a narrator whose “vision is impaired. She is wearing spectacles that magnify everything” (“Author Interview” n.pag.). While the author’s construction of an unreliable narrator makes for a more complex narrative voice, it is also a more believable one, given that Eva is the victim of trauma. Judith Herman, in her study of the way victims of trauma relate what has happened to them, notes that “[p]eople who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (1). Ironically, then, Shriver’s deliberate use of an unreliable narrator creates a voice that is a more plausible reflection of a traumatised speaker. Such a voice’s relation of events will be clouded by the effect of the events itself. Since Eva is writing this after *Thursday*, all her recollections are tainted with the knowledge of what she knows Kevin will become. Shrieking baby Kevin, for instance, is thus no mere difficult baby but the spiteful baby who will become a killer. This slanted perspective infuses every episode and adds to the inevitable untrustworthiness of Eva’s retelling.

Trauma influences how Eva sees the past and it influences what she selects to remember. Because Kevin has killed her husband and daughter, it is conceivable that Eva will be more likely to recall, and focus on, all the incidents that hint at Kevin’s homicidal potential. Eva never suggests that she knew all along what her son was capable of, but her memories shared in her letters do combine to paint a picture of someone who was born malicious and without empathy. Shriver says of her narrator: “We all choose to remember some events more often than others, because they play to our version of the world and of ourselves, whereas the memories that challenge who we are to ourselves have a funny tendency to sweep away” (in

Shute 64). However, although Eva is selective in her recall, she does not sweep away the idea that she may have influenced Kevin. Eva also admits that memory is unreliable (346), that she cannot trust her own version of events (418) and that the corresponding uncertainty regarding her role in Kevin's actions is unendurable (82). Eva's letters are therefore permeated by paradox: she selects particular memories that confirm her hypothesis and then undermines these recollections by admitting that she may be wrong about how she has interpreted them. The use of the epistolary mode enables this contradiction because, as Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven contend, the letter has been figured as "the trope of authenticity and intimacy" (1). The external reader thus believes that Eva is being honest about her perception of events precisely because she confesses to her intimate correspondent that her perception is possibly flawed.

Eva's complex speaking position as unreliable but honest narrator fits the complicated and problematic nature of the issues that she is writing about. It would be easy to classify Kevin as a born psychopath or, alternatively, to believe that Eva's failure to bond with Kevin was responsible for his coldness. Certainly, a clear-cut 'it's all the mother's fault' would provide a painful but straightforward resolution. However, Eva is not willing to simplify the complexities of her situation with this kind of consolation that also acquits others and society at large of some culpability. She, for example, writes: "But for me this greedy gorging on fault never works. I am never able to get the full story inside me. It's larger than I am" (78). This suggests that locating all blame on one person provides for others a dishonest and facile exoneration. There are forces outside of herself that may have contributed to the creation of Kevin, things over which she had no control and which the novel opens up for discussion and investigation by its readers.

School shootings in America have been discussed endlessly in the media over the last fifteen to twenty years, since they have become tragically frequent occurrences.⁴ However, these

⁴ Michael Rocque notes that from 1996-2012 nearly 60 shootings took place in American schools with violent rampage shootings increasing substantially in the last decade of the twentieth century (305). His compilation of research findings suggests that nearly all shooters are middle-class white males who display signs of mental illness. Shooters were either psychopathic (sadistic and feeling no guilt or emotional connection to their victims), psychotic (suffering from a break with reality) or traumatised (suffering a traumatic stressor prior to the shooting). All three types appear to see the school rampage as a symbolic gesture or ceremonial violence and also use it to gain status and prestige. Contributing factors appear to be the easy availability of guns in the USA and violent media such as movies and video games. Traci Wike and Mark Fraser also note that school shooters often display a fascination with weapons; depression, anger, and suicidal ideation; rejection by peers and failed relationships; victimisation by peers (164). Both articles refer to numerous studies and intervention programmes,

discussions have tended to focus on identifying potential threats, gaps in school security, gun control and the availability of violent video game content, while *We Need to Talk about Kevin* unfolds the issue to a much deeper examination of the interplay between what goes on in the privacy of the family unit and society at large. The novel explores the nexus of the personal and the political by using a narrative mode associated with the private. This is fitting because, although school shootings take place in a public setting and profoundly affect the communities in which they occur, the intimate space of the family, particularly the family of the perpetrator, is usually clothed in mystery and secrecy since they are unlikely to share their stories for fear of recrimination. While the homes of the killers may be examined for forensic evidence and the family exposed to prying eyes and public analysis, what really happened in the perpetrator's home within the dynamics of the family often remains hidden. In the case of school shooters who commit suicide (a fairly common occurrence), there is no sympathy for their families whilst, in contrast, public sympathy for the victims and their families is often displayed in mass outpourings of grief, a grief on which the media capitalises with blatant self-serving reification. The media not only turns this grief into a commodity and spectacle but also manipulates how school shootings will be discussed by creating what Glenn Muschert terms an "interpretive framework for the story, which facilitates the discourse about an issue as well as the public understanding" of it (165). The employment of the epistolary mode acts as a counterpoint to this framework since it locates itself in the confidential space of a marriage and reveals the personal experiences of someone who has been isolated and ostracised from the public. Thus, as Phipps points out, Shriver's novel "complicate[s] the mainstream discourse" on school shootings (100). Eva's letters reveal, amongst other things, that much of what the media portrays about the executors of school massacres is simplistic and that it creates in its discussion of the shooters a "persona that brings together a series of broad, collective concerns about adolescent life in contemporary America" (Phipps 100).

One such simplistic belief is that the planners of these shootings are all downtrodden social outcasts who were bullied by their peers. While Kevin is not a popular boy, he is never bullied. Rather, it is he who taunts and caustically mocks his classmates who stand out as different. Eva's view of him is that "the poor-persecuted-misfit-we-must-do-something-to-

all of which appear to focus on what schools can do to recognise children who display warning signs, how schools can tighten security and create a gun-free, bullying-free climate. My cursory examination of hundreds of sources about school violence revealed that most scientific research focuses on adolescent constructions of masculinity, the role of the media and bullying in schools. The role of parents and family life in the psychological make-up of school rampage shooters enjoys little prominence.

stop-bullying-in-schools number wouldn't go very far" (422), and her experience of her son as an intimidator, not only of his peers but also of his mother and sister, suggests that seeing the school shooting phenomenon through a bullying-lens potentially distracts us from properly exploring the psychological make-up of some killers. To corroborate this she refers to Andy Williams, the Santana High shooter,⁵ who "hadn't been 'bullied' [and who] failed to support the now fashionable revenge-of-the nerds interpretation of these incidents, which were now meant to teach us not stricter gun control but concern for the agonies of the underage outcast" (336). Eva is uneasy with society's media-inspired need to mitigate the crime of the perpetrator by viewing him as a victim. However, she can only express this unease in the private space of letters because the public forum does not accept the viewpoints of mothers whose narratives about their children do not support popular consensus. Eva's letters reveal that there is something inherently sinister about her son that no amount of control (be it from the school or home environment) could have prevented. Shriver cleverly makes this more obvious by creating a killer who chooses unconventional means to eliminate his victims. Kevin's use of a deadly cross-bow instead of a machine gun adroitly avoids the gun control bandwagon and forces the reader to consider that this 'neat' explanation flattens out a far more complex phenomenon. Not only does Kevin's mode of killing mean that "liberal friends wouldn't be able to parade him before Congress as one more poster boy for gun control" (423), it also reveals that he "liked the idea of setting himself apart" (422). This points to a perverse desire for infamy which many school shooters appear to share.⁶ Kevin shows this attribute when he gloatingly asks a television interviewer: "What are they watching?" He immediately responds to his own question with: "People like me" (415).

Ironically, it is the media that provides a platform for living out this desire for notoriety since school shooters become celebrities of a sort. Their names become synonymous with their crime while, as Eva points out when referring to Andy Williams: "I doubt there's a news consumer in the country who could tell you the name of either of the two students he shot dead" (336). So it is that KK – Kevin Khatchadourian – becomes a household name and he thoroughly enjoys being interviewed by the media and feared by his fellow inmates at Claverack Juvenile Correctional Facility in Chatham. Eva's private letters reveal that the

⁵ On 5 March 2001, 15-year-old Charles Andrew 'Andy' Williams killed two students and wounded 13 others at Santana High School in Santee, California. He was tried as an adult and given a life sentence.

⁶ James Allen Fox and Harvey Burstein point out that adolescents are taught that "violence can earn them celebrity status. Indeed more than the media coverage itself, the notoriety that popular culture showers upon school shooters teaches our youth – especially alienated and marginalised teenagers – a lesson about how to get attention and how to be in the spotlight" (81).

public discussions in the media as to the causes of these killings may actually provide the fuel for further massacres (295). Phipps confirms that Kevin has “internalise[d], reformulate[d] and manipulate[d] the very issues that the media invoke when covering rampage school shootings” (100). Furthermore, Eva worries that her sarcastic comments while watching the news reports about school shootings in Moses Lake, Palm Beach and Bethel may have prompted fifteen-year-old Kevin to act on his impulses, possibly because he may not have understood her sardonic stance. While she scathingly “[d]ecr[ies] the politics of hysteria” regarding the shootings, she admits that “they hit a nerve” and later regrets that Kevin overheard her satirically saying, “wouldn’t it be keen if the eighth-grade dance turned into a melee and we could all get on TV before the whole tacky number becomes passé” (295). This description of her unthinking remark provides a good example of the intersection of the private and public: the media-generated frenzy glamorises these horrible events in the mind of a boy who is emotionally disturbed and/or deficient, but his psychological health may, or may not, have already been forged by his interactions at home. It is impossible for Eva to say with any certainty that her critical comments were Kevin’s inspiration or to tidily apportion blame to the media, but her letters do show that it is often wrong about why school shooters act as they do. Thus, while she may not be an entirely reliable narrator, her privately expressed version of the events she experienced herself is ‘truer’ than the guesses and suppositions of the popular media.

In the midst of reportage about the factors that lead up to a child becoming a killer, one element is often overlooked and it is this element that Eva dissects throughout her letters: that evil might be innate. Kevin is not taught to be rancorous and unloving; he appears to have been born with a mean streak. However, Eva does what many mothers of malevolent people probably do – she attempts to find the cause of Kevin’s hostility within herself and the way in which she raised him. In the process, she is unflinchingly honest about her selfish actions and deceptions but, although she is not the most nurturing of mothers, these failings do not adequately account for the depth of Kevin’s spite and rage. It is Eva who bears the brunt of Kevin’s malice since he reserves his worst torments for her, such as killing Franklin and Celia and then provokingly playing with Celia’s glass eye when Eva visits him at Claverack (461). Although her letters are primarily about the trauma involved in raising Kevin, Eva’s heartaches do not begin with him. Cathy Caruth claims that “the theory of individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history” (*Unclaimed Experience* 71), which is true for Eva as her personal history of trauma is also situated within larger traumas

that have been instrumental in forming her identity. Raised with the knowledge that over a million of her people were slaughtered in the Armenian Genocide, she also grew up without a father whose death contributed to her mother's crippling agoraphobia. The personal experience of the effects of these traumas has cast an indelible stamp on how Eva perceives the world, as is evident from what she writes in a letter to Franklin: "holocausts do not amaze me. [...] Kevin does not amaze me. [...] I am amazed when a checkout girl flashes me a wide smile. [...] Celia amazed me" (250). This astonishment at kindness and warmth shows that the repeated experience of trauma has made Eva cynical about human nature.

Although violence may be common to all cultures, Kevin chooses to perpetrate a crime particular to America. Eva notes that Franklin selected his son's name because it was typically American and that "young Kevin – your choice – has turned out as American as a Smith and Wesson" (73).⁷ The irony of this is not lost on Eva who has tried very hard to distance herself from the stereotypical American characteristics that she loathes. She emphasises her Armenian heritage through keeping her surname, never identifies herself with other Americans when she is travelling and is often quite scathing about conservative American values and habits. Her career as a low-budget-travel writer had provided her not only with the assurance that she was able to break free from her mother's self-imposed confinement, but constant travelling also enabled her to view herself as a liberal cosmopolitan, unyoked from a narrow American way of thinking. Phipps notes that "Eva structures her contemptuous superiority around a rejection of the generic values of American culture, even as she is forced to participate in the life of suburban motherhood" (112). As a disaffected adolescent Kevin is quick to point out that she is a hypocrite when she constantly criticises her fellow citizens because she is, to his mind, no different from them. At his fifteenth birthday dinner, he snidely tells her that her attitude is "self-righteous – condescending – and superior" (328). In hindsight, Eva realises that her criticisms of Americans were in fact attempts to separate herself from an identity she did not want to embrace. In the end, it is *Thursday* that forces Eva to accept her 'Americanness', for it is a typically American crime. *Thursday* also brands Eva with a new unwanted identity, as she tells Franklin: "Mother of the ignoble Kevin Khatchadourian is who I am now, an identity that amounts to one more of our son's little victories" (196).

⁷ Franklin's name is also suggestive of American values. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the only U.S. president to be elected four times. He led America through the Great Depression and World War 2.

Eva's use of the word "victories" implies that she has come to view her relationship with her son as an ongoing battle of sorts. This begins with her sense of being invaded when pregnant with Kevin and continues with the insidious impact he has on her marriage. Before having Kevin, Eva views Franklin as a 'place' of comfort and safety. When she travels around the world, he – the addressee of her postcards – represents home to her. This suggests that Franklin embodies attachment and connection to which the travelling Eva can return. The freedom that comes with her profession is not in opposition to the domesticity represented by Franklin. However, Kevin changes all of that because their dissension over him ruins their connection, strains their marriage and makes their family abode an unwelcoming, unhappy place. She recalls that she told the usually ebullient babysitter, Siobhan, that "it is different when it's yours. You can't go home", and that "[i]ndeed my yearning to *go home* had grown recurrent, but was most intense when I was already there" (124). Kevin alters their family life to such an extent that Eva and Franklin's detachment radiates to the space they share. Hence, when she writes to Franklin that he had "restored to [her] the concept of home" and that "[h]ome is precisely what Kevin has taken from [her]" (53), she does not mean their suburban house that she secretly hated and later lost due to legal fees, but the literal and figurative loss of the man who had given her a sense of belonging.

When Franklin is murdered and Eva becomes the town pariah due to the school shootings, her estrangement from her broader home environment is absolute. No one wants to have anything to do with her and she becomes the target upon which their hatred can be enacted. Her apartment is defaced with bright red paint (8), the eggs in her shopping trolley are smashed (4) and she is even taken to civil court to be tried as responsible for Kevin's actions (81). Because she is completely isolated from her community, she says, "Kevin has turned me into a foreigner again, in my own country" (53). Her letter writing in her cold uninviting apartment thus takes place in a habitat of unease, dislocation and unsettlement. As I have argued, letters are usually indicative of confinement to the domestic sphere, but Eva's letters further highlight that her domestic sphere feels nothing like a true home. Her letters to the man she had previously equated with a happy domestic space carry enormous pathos because his new 'address' is unknowable and unreachable. She tells Kevin in prison: "I miss your father, Kevin. I still talk to him. I even write to him, if you can believe it. I write him letters. And now they're in a big messy stack on my desk because I don't know his address" (463). The Franklin she misses is the pre-Kevin Franklin who represented home, but there is no longer an identifiable 'home' to write to and the home she writes from is alien to her.

An alienated narrator is common to epistolary texts since being alone, or feeling cut off from others, is often what prompts the letter-writing. Letters become the means to reaching out and ameliorating the loneliness through conjuring up the presence of the addressee and, possibly, receiving a letter in response. However, Eva's terrible isolation cannot be remedied because such a letter of response is not possible and Eva writes into a silence. Each letter is littered with direct addresses to Franklin and rhetorical prompts for him to reply, but his persistent lack of response reinforces our sense of Eva's isolation. Of course, upon first reading the novel, the external reader does not know that Franklin is dead and assumes that this failure to reply is due to an unwillingness to do so. This assumption is based on the fact that almost all epistolary texts show a correspondence or, if they are only one side of a correspondence (like *So Long a Letter*), make reference to the received letters of the addressee. Franklin's silence leads readers to believe that Franklin and Eva are estranged and that the letters are her attempts to tell her side of the story in order to facilitate reconciliation and end her ostracism. The surprising revelation in the second-last letter that Franklin is, in fact, dead leads to a re-evaluation of every preceding letter. Now all the clues that suggest that he is alive and reading her letters can be interpreted as indicative of Eva's trauma and her need to pretend to herself that her beloved is still living, as if she is trapped in denial. When she writes: "I worry that throughout that handwritten passage you've been skimming, reading ahead" (46), she writes as though he is sharing her present, indicating that she has not accepted that he is relegated irrevocably to her past. Sometimes Eva writes in equivocations that neither refute nor admit the reality of Franklin's death. For example, her references to "since we've been separated" (1), "with the two of us estranged" (8) and an "irretrievable breakdown" (162) all show an ambivalence between knowing and reluctance to know. Since her letters enable Eva to keep Franklin alive whilst coming to terms with his death, they both allow her to sustain a fantasy but also move towards a shaking off of her comforting delusion.

Eva displays this same duality when writing about Celia. Upon first reading the novel, the external reader may find it troubling that she does not mention her daughter at all until page 250. One could argue that this delay is another example of how Eva is not allowing herself to grieve normally and is cutting herself off from the intense pain of her loss by rationally and systematically working through all the events that led up to *Thursday*. Her detailed chronological exegesis that places Celia more than half way through the story is perhaps her way of making sense of it all and eventually accepting the truth, but it also has the effect of

making Eva appear to be emotionally detached. It is a feature of trauma writing that there may be an acknowledgement of feelings but also a shielding from them; an awareness of the traumatic event but a refusal to engage with its memory. Herman argues that the central dialectic of psychological trauma is that there is a “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). For example, when Eva says: “I might have been able to handle everything – *Thursday*, the trials, even our separation – if only I had been allowed to keep Celia” (265), there is a hint at pain without the full admission that Celia is dead rather than in her father’s custody, as the equivocal statement implies. The withholding of the description of Franklin’s and Celia’s deaths leads the reader to assume that Eva’s long build up to this revelation is part of her gradual acceptance and healing process. Eva’s letters thus function like psychoanalytical sessions where the ‘talking cure’ allows the mourner to measuredly approach and eventually confront pain.

However, even after the description of the murders she continues to write to Franklin in the present tense, suggesting that as long as she continues her correspondence her mourning remains unfinished. According to Robert Lifton, it is a common feature of trauma that it will lead to unresolved or incomplete mourning and thus “stasis and entrapment in the traumatic process” (in Herman 69). This is because violent, unnatural death disrupts the natural grieving sequence and robs those left behind of normal mourning. Franklin’s death at the hands of the son he adored is so awful a prospect to contemplate that Eva uses the chronological letters to avoid immediately confronting the full horror of his and of Celia’s murder. Because she was not present at the moment of their deaths, she also can never know the details of the event – she can only feel the repercussions of its aftermath. Caruth says that trauma narratives tell us that “what returns to haunt the victim [...] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Eva’s imagined scenario in which she relates what she believes must have happened when Kevin killed his father and sister is an attempt to encounter the moment of trauma. She tells Franklin: “I may need too badly to tell myself a story, but I’ve felt compelled to weave some thread of connection between the otherwise meaningless dishevelment of that backyard and the finest in the man I married” (453). Inventing the excruciating particulars of what happened is a way to make them real and finally accept them.

The process towards integration, however, is a long one and Eva uses a variety of techniques to stall its finality for as long as she can. Hence, Eva primarily writes to Franklin using direct

speech as if she is talking to him. When describing Mary Woolford, the mother of one of Kevin's victims, she tells Franklin: "Don't try to guess" (3). Not only does she write to him as if she is speaking to him – a feature facilitated by the epistolary mode – she addresses him as if he is responding to what she says. Although he cannot respond, she anticipates what his response would have been and speaks to him accordingly. For example, when she tells him that she needs to take tranquilizers in order to sleep at night, she says: "Please don't say anything, Franklin, I know you don't approve" (10). Moreover, she speaks to him as though his emotions were still real, such as when she tells him that she is living alone in an awful apartment and says: "Yet I do hope that you're not feeling sorry for me; it's not my intention that you do" (6). She never explicitly articulates what her intentions are, but we infer from these attempts to simulate a dialogue that she is harkening back nostalgically to the time before they had Kevin when they shared an intimacy and common understanding.

The use of the epistolary mode here facilitates the notion of intimacy as well as the impression of a long and on-going, but interrupted, conversation. Real epistolary correspondences would have gaps – or interruptions – in time between when the letters are sent and when they are read, as well as gaps when waiting for a response. Nicky Hallet explains that the epistolary is "a genre characterised by its hiatus and the anticipatory pleasures, as well as agonies, that it can contain" (111). Eva mimics this kind of time gap and creates the illusion of its attendant anticipation between some of her letters. For instance, when she knows that she can no longer avoid telling Franklin the truth about how Kevin broke his arm because she has come to that point in her chronological narrative, she ends the letter dated 13 January with the words: "I promise to explain, Franklin, but right now I just can't" (205). The next letter, dated 17 January, begins: "I am sorry to have left you dangling, and I have been dreading an explanation ever since" (207). The four-day gap suggests that she needed to pluck up the courage to tell Franklin that she was the one who had broken Kevin's arm, but the gap is also partially illusory since she has not sent the letter and Franklin has not actually been waiting anxiously to hear her explanation. Eva has transferred her own need to confess onto Franklin – as if he is as desperate to hear her story as she is to tell it, even though she feels apprehensive about doing so. She also assigns her emotions to Franklin when she tells him: "Doubtless we both dread wading back through events whose only redeeming feature is that they are over. But they are not over. Not for me" (304). By writing to Franklin as if their feelings are the same, she is attempting to lessen the emotional load that she is carrying. Her admission that for her the events are not over (implying that for him they

are) is, in revealing contrast, an acknowledgement that she is, in fact, shouldering this burden alone. The quotation above is another example of her co-occurring denial and admission which stimulates our sympathy since we recognise that these self-deceptions emanate from unspeakable pain.

Similarly, even after she imagines Franklin's murder in agonising detail, Eva begins the next (and final) letter with "Dear Franklin". Her persistence in writing to him posthumously as if he were alive demonstrates that death does not vanquish the desire to talk to the beloved; rather, it heightens it. Like Saul Bellow's Herzog who also writes to the dead, Eva uses letters as a way to engage with the ghosts of her pre-*Thursday* life. Cases like these, according to Altman, make epistles a "medium" in the "spiritualistic sense" that enables the narrator to "reestablish contact with shades of [the] past" (37). This contact shows the extent to which the narrator both haunts the past and is haunted by the people and events in it. The letters are intermediaries that function as bridges to the spectres on the other side of death. To those in sustained or incomplete mourning, this division is paradoxically both a chasm and immaterial. Regarding his writing to the late Spinoza, Herzog argues: "Why then shouldn't he write to the dead? He lived with them as much as with the living – perhaps more; and besides, his letters to the living were increasingly mental, and anyway, to the Unconscious, what was death?" (225). The way in which Eva speaks to Franklin throughout the letters suggests a similar understanding of the differentiation, and lack of it, between life and death. The action of writing to Franklin is thus characterised by contradictions: it keeps him present, but the act of writing is necessitated by the fact that he is not there; it breaks the isolating bonds of death, but it is his death that makes her lonely; it both sustains and facilitates mourning; it is a way of coming to terms with the irremediable past but also enables her to deal with her present.

It would seem that for Eva the letters serve what Altman terms a "psychotherapeutic function" (41), where "the letter is both the symptom of the neurosis and the instrument for its cure" (43). The letters spring from trauma but also become coping mechanisms. Eva tells Franklin: "I know I wrote only yesterday, but I now depend on this correspondence to debrief from Chatham" (67). Thus, the letters help her to release her torment after each visit to Kevin in Juvenile Detention. Since there is no support for the mothers of murderers, and they find themselves detested by and excluded from society, writing to Franklin who used to be her confidant is her only recourse. When she says: "Thus far I had found my only 'help' in writing to you" (100), it is clear that she is writing to and for herself as much as she is writing

to Franklin. Hence, she uses letter writing as a form of narrative therapy. Ironically, she also fears that this therapy will be too effective because if she achieves closure then it would mean having to say goodbye and ending the correspondence: “I feel certain that these letters are not on the list of prescribed therapies, since you are at the heart of what I need to ‘get past’ so that I might experience ‘closure’. And what a terrible prospect is that” (100). Eva wants healing but is also frightened of letting go of her pain, for that pain keeps Franklin alive for her too.

The letters ameliorate pain but also stimulate pain because, as Ruth Perry notes, “we live through an experience a second time in the writing of it” (122). This is seen when Eva finally tells Franklin about Kevin taunting her with Celia’s glass eye during a visit to Claverack. It is already months after the incident and to explain this delay she says: “I haven’t held it back because I thought you couldn’t take it. I didn’t want to think about it myself or subject you to it” (460). Writing about the harrowing event would have forced her to think about it and she was not able to do so until she had reached the point in her narrative where she had unfolded what had led to this specific encounter. Writing is therefore part of the procedure of interpreting and clarifying experiences for herself in order to fully understand and assimilate them so that the attendant pain becomes more bearable, perhaps because it has been rationalised through explanation.

Complete comprehension of Kevin and his actions remains elusive, however, because he is not able to explain his motives. In the last letter, Eva relates how she asks Kevin why he had killed Franklin, Celia and his other victims, to which he responds that he used to think he knew but is no longer sure (464). Since he is about to turn 18, he is facing internment in an adult penitentiary and fears what lies ahead. This, in addition to maturing, has forced Kevin to reconsider his actions and he finds that the certainties he once had are evaporating.

Through the course of her letters, Eva comes to a similar realisation:

[B]ut since then – and throughout writing these letters to you – I have come full circle, making a journey much like Kevin’s own. In asking petulantly whether *Thursday* was my fault, I have had to go backward, to deconstruct. [...] I don’t know. At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace. (467)

Full knowledge with an attendant final verdict is unattainable and, Eva contends, futile, because it will not change what has happened. Despite the ultimate impotence involved in the search for a satisfying solution, the process of the quest is not unavailing since working towards this ‘answer’ through writing these letters is necessary.

Eva also uses the letters as a form of confession wherein she catalogues her ‘crimes’, not only as a mother but also as a wife. Her epistles are a means to express her regrets and to lay bare to Franklin everything that she had hidden from him within their marriage. She tells him: “I’d become accustomed to concealing things from you, but mostly thought crimes” (102) and “So much lying in marriage is merely a matter of keeping quiet” (109). Now that her husband is dead, she desperately wants to break these silences, not only by talking to him in the present but by verbalising everything that was unsaid between them in the past. Franklin’s death exacerbates her need to unburden herself of things hitherto concealed because it adds to her sense of guilt. In her second letter, when she recalls how they would confer at the end of each day, she says, “one of the things that impels me to write is that my mind is huge with all the little stories I never told you” (13). Her confessional epistles are thus attempts to rectify the mistake of not sharing everything with her spouse, something she now regards as one of her marital ‘crimes’. However, it is a crime that Franklin contributed towards by not being receptive to the truths she had wanted to reveal throughout their marriage. She implies that he made it too difficult for her to be candid through his unwillingness to accept what she was trying to tell him when she says: “Don’t imagine that I’ve enjoyed my secrets. They’ve trapped me, crowded me in, and long ago I’d have liked nothing more than to pour out my heart. But Franklin, you didn’t want to hear” (14). Also, his tendency to blame her rather than to discuss what concerned her about their son consistently deflected honest deliberation. It would seem that when a partner makes it clear that there are things he/she will be disinclined to hear, dishonesty through omission will be inevitable. Ironically, then, silence is imposed by the very person to whom Eva wants to confess. When a pregnant Eva says that they should perhaps have reconsidered having children, Franklin shuts off any further frankness regarding her ambivalent feelings towards impending parenthood with his emphatic: “Don’t you *ever say that*” (76). She is hurt that up till now they had been able to tell each other every sordid detail of their thought lives, but that this one issue was out of bounds. She expresses her disappointment in the erosion of their candidness with each other when she questions him, retrospectively: “[S]ince when was there anything that one of us was *never, ever*, to say?” (76). Franklin’s refusal to allow forthright discussion on anything that did not fit his

perception of Kevin and his ideals of the American family therefore suppressed Eva's willingness to disclose her secret fears and actions. Now that he is dead, she feels compelled to unearth every hidden deed, such as when she covertly had an amniocentesis done. She could never have told him while he was alive because he could not bear any suggestion that their child would not be perfect or wholeheartedly wanted, but in her letter she admits it: "I never told you, but I got the test behind your back" (86). The letters, therefore, provide Eva with the opportunity to express what Franklin had not allowed her to say and they thus give her a kind of freedom she had not had when they were married, even if this freedom is a sham since Franklin cannot really hear her. These confessions are also linked to her need for forgiveness, but Eva knows that this is not possible as Franklin is not able to offer her absolution. Hence she tells him: "I'm not even asking your forgiveness; it's late for that. But I badly need your understanding" (224).

This desire to be understood by Franklin can also be viewed in the light of society's misapprehension regarding her role as Kevin's mother. She has faced so much condemnation that she admits that "it's far less important to [her] to be liked these days than to be understood" (5). She cannot alter others' perceptions of her, so her need for her husband, at the very least, to comprehend her side of the story is unsurprising. When in court, for instance, her stony look is read as defiance and she realises that her grief had been completely misread, as is evident when she exclaims in a letter to him: "But Franklin, 'defiant'? I was trying not to cry" (9). The things said about her in the media are so vitriolic that she has no defence against them. Her private letters to Franklin are her only recourse in the face of such public castigation and they form a counter narrative to this public discourse. That this should take place in private correspondence is also seen in other epistolary texts where rumour and misguided public opinion surround the beleaguered correspondents. For example, in Richardson's *Clarissa* there is a lot of unfair and libellous gossip about the heroine, which is why Linda Kauffmann sees the correspondence between Anna Howe and Clarissa as an "exhortation to set the record straight, to clear her name" (*Discourses* 130). Mikhail Bakhtin terms such discourse a discourse of pathos because it is written in response to "alien points of view" and is "associated with justification (self-justification) and accusation" (394). To him, such texts not only induce our pity but also continually sense the resistance to its logic and motives. As Eva constructs her story, the reader is aware that it is partly in reply to the views of those judging her, even in the most mundane of situations. Shopping for groceries becomes a gauntlet of glares whilst people viewing her house for sale posit that "[m]aybe it seems

unfair, but you really gotta wonder about the parents” (12). Eva feels that her life has been “smothered in a blanket of embarrassment” (10) wherein there is a constant cognizance of others’ fault-finding and contempt. Although she is not blind to her failings, her letters attempt to address some of the false accusations and unwarranted gossip.

Even though Eva writes in contestation of this mother-blaming, she largely believes it to be true. When meeting Loretta Greenleaf, the mother of another Claverack inmate, she tells her: “I expect it’s my fault” and “I wasn’t a very good mother – cold, judgemental, selfish. Though you can’t say I haven’t paid the price” (195). Although Eva resents how she has been misrepresented in the media and shamed by everyone around her, she has nevertheless taken on the ideology of mother blame and attributed Kevin’s shortcomings to her inadequate mothering. Loretta contests this idea quite forcefully when she says:

‘It’s always the mother’s fault, ain’t it? [...] That boy turn out bad cause his mamma a drunk, or a junkie. She let him run wild, she don’t teach him right from wrong. She never home when he back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not home after school. And nobody ever say they some kids just damned mean. Don’t you believe that old guff. Don’t you let them saddle you with all that killing.’ (195)

It is Loretta whose discourse of pathos now forms the counter narrative, for she stridently refutes the mother-is-always-at-fault myth. Eva is mindful of the unjustness of this myth but, because what Kevin has done is so reprehensible and she is so conscious of her own faults, she cannot categorically make Loretta’s audacious assertion. The insertion of Loretta’s viewpoint in Eva’s letter to Franklin creates a more balanced examination of the role of the mother for, had Eva said it, it would come across as disingenuously self-justifying.

Loretta’s viewpoint also goes against the grain of the prevailing standards for mothers as the upholders of the family’s virtue, a standard inseparable from the Puritan inheritance of the New World. Jennifer Harris notes that, “[a]ccording to popular values of Republican motherhood, women were held to be responsible for inculcating virtue in the next generation, a necessity if the newly United States were to fulfill both the promise and project of America” (364). Franklin, who so fervently believes in the utopian ideals of the American Dream, thus has very high expectations of his wife and believes that she should genuinely glory in her

sacrificial role as good mother who will impart these same values to her child. However, Eva with her strong inclination towards freedom and independence is aware of how she does not measure up to these ideals, even before she considers motherhood. In fact, her lack of desire to become a mother troubles her because it is expected of women to *want* to be mothers. She confesses that “[w]hen [she] hadn’t gone into maternal heat by [her] mid-thirties, [she] worried that there was something wrong with [her], something missing” (31). Although she does not want to be a mother, she believes that she is supposed to want it; as if the desire were a natural one and that she is deficient as a woman by dint of its absence. Then, once she does fall pregnant she falls prey to a related set of expectations regarding gestation – society’s belief that women should enjoy being pregnant. Her comment that “[w]e were supposed to be celebrating and I was supposed to be elated” (65) shows how much she has assimilated society’s suppositions regarding pregnancy. She can, however, only express her concerns about impending motherhood and her anger over the damage that pregnancy is doing to her body in the form of her later letters to Franklin, for these are not things that women readily admit in a public forum. Since society’s notions about the sublime nature of motherhood are so pervasive, expressing ambivalence, disappointment or even resentment over pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing is frowned upon. This censure leads to women suppressing these feelings and never talking about them.

Eva’s letters remain in the private realm of her marriage/widowhood within which she now has a safe ‘space’ to profess how she really feels about her experience of motherhood. The private realm is necessary as society does not want to hear from, or about, mothers who do not conform to its norms regarding maternity. In peculiar contrast, Eva notes that it is quick to treat the pregnant woman’s body as “social property” and states that “*the land of the free* has grown increasingly coercive” (62). Eva feels violated by everyone commenting on what she eats and drinks and admonishing her as to what activities and sports she should or should not be doing. She exasperatedly declares: “The right to boss pregnant women around was surely on its way into the Constitution” (63). This hyperbolic statement reveals the extent to which Eva feels that American society, which prides itself on its constitutionally enshrined freedoms, robs women of the right to make their own choices and invades even the most private space of the womb. The female body is thus inscribed by social injunctions but women themselves are silenced should their voices dissent against these edicts. Eva’s private letters, then, give voice to her mutiny against the public expectations on women’s desires, bodies, time and ambitions.

Eva takes exception to the fact that she is expected to give up her career aspirations once she has had Kevin. She had spent most of her adult life building up her travel book business, “A Wing and a Prayer”, which had been enormously successful, and is convinced that motherhood and maintaining her career should not be mutually exclusive. Sharon Wexler claims that a mother needs to have this kind of maternal resilience which enables her to “reclaim her numerous other subjectivities that exist outside of mothering, and thus, individuate from her child” (159). Instead, however, Franklin sees this need as selfish and feels that she should take a few years’ leave in order to stay at home to focus on child-rearing. The expectation that women give up any other subjectivity and pursue motherhood exclusively is one that Eva baulks at but nonetheless complies with in order to please her husband. They move out to the suburbs where they redecorate their new home and Eva later confesses in a letter to Franklin, “since our aesthetic reinvention coincided with my sabbatical from AWAP, I felt as if I were evaporating” (180). With her identity as career woman taken away from her, she has to create a new sense of self with which she finds it difficult to make peace. Her longing for her working days is so intense and her desperation to have a space in her home that is hers alone prompt her to decorate her study with maps of all the places she had travelled to. She explains that she does this that “[she] might figuratively orient [her]self in this alien life as a full-time suburban mother” (181). The maps are symbolic of not just where she had been but *who* she had been. Kevin, then four, senses that his mother’s sanctum excludes him and he sets about deliberately ruining her maps with a gun he loads with coloured ink; an action that only further agitates Eva’s nascent dislike of her son. Not only does he violate her private space which she associates with her career, her reaction to his malice impacts on her sense of self because no woman feels comfortable with hating her own child. Eva confesses that “[she] feared that at bottom [she] hated [her] life and hated being a mother and even in moments hated being [Franklin’s] wife” (223).

Patsy Turrini and Dale Mendell state that when a woman is overwhelmed by the real and idealised demands of childcare, her hateful feelings towards her child may feel dangerous to her sense of self and how she experiences and reacts to her child (in Wexler, 159). For many women, the reality of child-rearing does not match the expected ideal, since they seldom know beforehand how exhausting and all-consuming it can be. This may lead to feelings of anger or resentment towards their children, an anger that they feel ashamed of because they believe they are not supposed to feel that way. Eva is afraid of her feelings because she

believes that they are not natural and that they must suggest something reprehensible or monstrous about herself. After *Thursday*, Eva is tormented with the idea that Kevin's evil is a darker shade of her own, as if the resentment she felt, at times, towards him had contributed to his disposition. She tells Franklin: "[T]he snaps I have [...] all document a sobersided wariness and disturbing self-possession [...]. Those pictures are recognizable not only for their resemblance to the class photograph that appeared in all the papers but for their resemblance to me" and "the furtiveness of his gaze and the secrecy of his silence seemed to confront me with a miniature version of my own dissembling" (134, 135). She is clearly identifying Kevin's secretive nature with her own tendency not to reveal how she really feels. The things she does not share are suppressed precisely because they are feelings that society, including Franklin, does not accept as normal.

The notion that Kevin's malice stems from his mother's resentment of him is in tension with the idea that he was born a psychopath and that Eva's maternal aloofness results from an inability to bond with a child who did not welcome being loved. This tension runs throughout Eva's letters to Franklin and is never resolved as Eva harbours theories of both possibilities and is especially self-critical. However, it is possible that, in the light of *Thursday*, Eva is being too hard on herself and that it has skewed her perception of herself. She admits that after her house is defaced post-*Thursday* she does not cry because "[y]ou've already been so damaged that damage itself, in its totality, makes you safe" (8). Eva's concept of herself is part of that damage. As she painstakingly flecks open each of her "thought-crimes" which supposedly proves that she is a failed mother, we recognise that many of her small resentments and petty selfish responses are common to many mothers. However, women do not readily admit these feelings, as Barbara Almond notes in a blog about her book on maternal ambivalence: "The problem is not the feeling which is usually temporary, but the fear of speaking about it – it dare not speak its name" ("Maternal Ambivalence" n. pag.). Hence, the epistolary mode is a fitting one for this type of confession since it implies that it is intended that her feelings remain within the realm of the private.

Eva is aware that her unwelcome feelings need to be curbed and she tries very hard to be a good mother, almost by way of recompense. She consciously attempts to love Kevin, leading to a maternal ambivalence that plagues her letters, even to the final letter where she declares: "I love my son" (468). This vacillation between affection and resentment leads to an

unmanageable ambivalence, during which, Wexler states, “a mother may temporarily experience her infant/child as ‘all bad’. In her state of extreme internal chaos, a woman may imagine her ‘all bad’ child as intentionally punishing her regardless of her attempts to be a ‘good’ mother” (159). It may be that just as Eva’s concept of herself has been damaged by *Thursday* and its ensuing trauma, so too has her concept of Kevin. She certainly does not mention any kind of loving gesture on his part and the external reader does not know whether these simply do not exist or whether trauma has twisted her memory or her retelling. She describes baby Kevin as a “singular, unusually cunning individual” (103) and sees his crying when she is alone with him but not when Franklin is home as a ploy to sow division in the home, even though it is unlikely that a small baby could strategise in this way.

Whether Kevin had plotted to ruin his parents’ marriage or not, their disagreements over him are the primary reason for their marital breakdown. She recalls that when Franklin first mentions divorce that “[she] had never so fully and consciously wished that [she] had never borne [their] son” (406). Since she loves Franklin deeply, the prospect of living without him is unbearable and Eva has no hesitation in seeing Kevin as the cause of their estrangement. The impact raising Kevin has on their marriage also affects how Eva views motherhood since maternal subjectivity is affected by how it interacts with a woman’s other relationships. Brid Featherstone explains maternal subjectivity as “the ways that fantasy, meaning, biography and relational dynamics inform individual women’s position in relation to a variety of discourses concerning motherhood” (in Wexler 158). Because Franklin appears to take Kevin’s side in everything and spends most of his free time with his son, Eva finds herself feeling jealous of Kevin’s monopoly over his father’s affections. Sadly, Franklin’s deep and uncomplicated love for his son is not reciprocated. Kevin sees his father as an idiot who tries too hard and fails in the process of trying to be the perfect father because he loves his *idea* of his son rather than who he really was. Kevin cruelly tells the television interviewer:

He was into some Little League fantasy, stuck in the 1950s. I’d get this *I luuuuuuuuw you, buddy!* stuff, and I’d just look at him like, *Who are you talking to guy?* What does that mean, your dad ‘loves’ you and hasn’t a [bleep]ing clue who you are? What’s he love, then? Some kid in *Happy Days*. Not me.
(413)

Franklin's idealised version of his son irked Kevin because he knew that what his father believed in was a fable, whereas he confirms that Eva's suspicions about him were correct all along and he grudgingly respects her dislike of him because she evidently knew him as he really was. *Thursday* also validates the perception Eva claims to have had of Kevin from infancy. However, being proven to be right is no consolation for Eva – what mattered to her was convincing Franklin of the veracity of her claims. Her letters set out to do what she was unable to do while he was still alive. Although she never directly blames Franklin for his own death, she does imply that his naïve misreading of his son contributed to what happened. She tells him that his “sincere confusion of the *is* with the *ought to be* – [his] heartrending tendency to mistake what [he] actually had for what [he] desperately wanted – would produce such devastating consequences” (18). Her letters thus have the flavour of an extended ‘I told you so’.

If Eva, unlike Franklin, knew the ‘real’ Kevin and finally proclaims that she loves him and has a room ready for him when he gets out of prison, then the son whom she loves is not a romanticised image of her child. This does not mean that Eva's maternal ambivalence has dissolved; it merely suggests that she has made peace with it. In court, she publically claims: “Of course I love my son,” but she admits in her private letter to Franklin: “I felt that I was lying and that any judge or jury would be able to tell” (81). Later, just before emphasising that she loves Kevin (468), she categorically states that “we don't like mothers who ‘don't like’ their own sons” (466) and she admits to Kevin at an earlier visit: “I often hate you too, Kevin” (51). After the attack on Kevin's school, she rushes over in a panic not yet knowing that he is the perpetrator and states: “When Rose told me there'd been a vicious assault at Kevin's high school and some students were feared dead, I worried for his well-being” (431). It would seem that her internal battle over these conflicting feelings has been played out in the process of writing about them. By acknowledging the difficulties in loving an unlovable child and being honest about the emotional fatigue that accompanies the effort, Eva progresses towards accepting her failings as a mother. Sarah Ruddick, a leading feminist thinker regarding motherhood, believes that, with the enormous and unrealistic expectations placed on mothers, maternal practice is inherently flawed and involves feelings of failure (in Messer 13). Eva experiences a sense of failure from the beginning of her relationship with Kevin and says, after she does not experience the birth as a moving event, that “the whole thing was going wrong from the start, that [she] was not following the program, that [she] had dismally failed [them] and [their] newborn baby. That [she] was, frankly a freak” (98). This

feeling of failure largely comes from what women have been taught to expect. They are led to believe that giving birth is a profoundly touching experience and when Eva does not have a rapturous moment, she vows to stay silent about it. She tells Franklin: “I would never reveal to anyone on earth that childbirth had left me unmoved” (98). It is easier, perhaps, to admit this now that he is not there to show disappointment or revulsion. Putting it down on paper is a way to divulge what she has muted over the years without having to do so to a judgmental audience. It is also a way to come to an acceptance of failure, even though much of what she views as failure stems from unrealistic social expectations.

Eva is keenly aware of how her real experience does not match the social prescriptions of motherhood and that there is a gap between what she does feel and what she would like to feel. After she breaks Kevin’s arm, she comments on how much effort she had put into being a good mother and says that “trying to be a good mother may be as distant from trying to have a good time as from truly having one” (231). The enormity of her effort suggests that she had hoped that by performing the work involved in being a good mother, she would experience the emotional pay-off that one associates with motherhood. Since neither Franklin, through his implicit and overt criticisms, nor Kevin give Eva affirmation for her efforts, her self-reflexivity is also not self-affirming and she assumes that she must be a bad mother. Clearly, complying with the tasks of motherhood does not automatically translate into fulfilment, especially when there is no reward and when the presumed attendant emotions are absent. Pascale Molinier states that “Eva feels unnatural because while she can undertake the tasks, she can’t access the emotions that are socially ascribed as belonging to those tasks and which create meaning and are linked to self-fulfillment” (in Messer 16). In addition, actualisation as a mother is paradoxically linked to the happiness of one’s child. Apart from one exception, Kevin never provides Eva with the satisfaction of making her son happy or of experiencing his love for her. It is unclear whether Kevin was incapable of emotional reciprocity or that he could sense that his mother’s efforts were exactly that – efforts. Eva gives an example to illustrate this lack of clarity when she says: “Every time I forced myself to smile, he clearly knew that I didn’t feel like smiling, because he never smiled back” (102). Here, Eva reads Kevin’s failure to respond appropriately as indicative of her failure to *feel* appropriately. This contributes to the ambivalent voice since it is possible that Kevin’s refusal to smile was located in his emotional deficiency, but it is also possible that he could sense the falseness of her gesture.

While Kevin comes across as devoid of emotion, he certainly is very adept at reading the emotions of others. He knows, for instance, that his stubborn declining to use the toilet and insistence on defecating and urinating in a nappy at the age of six cause both of his parents distress, which culminates in the incident that leads to Eva breaking his arm. In this moment of physical violence, Eva confesses that “at last there was an unmediated confluence between what I felt and what I did” (232). This was the first time she had acted in a way that was consistent with her feelings and Kevin knew it. This implies that Kevin instinctively sensed his mother’s real feelings towards him and disliked her dishonest attempts to demonstrate affection she did not feel. Kevin’s response, after returning from the hospital, is to defecate in the toilet, which Eva interprets as “*being rewarded*” (237) for finally demonstrating her true feelings. However, she cannot share these emotions with Franklin and the incident remains a secret mother and son share, which Eva sees as Kevin “experience[ing] a closeness to [her] that he was reluctant to let go. Not only were [they] in this cover-up together, but during the very assault [they] were concealing, Kevin too may have felt whole” (238). It would seem that Kevin, rather than being shocked at his mother’s rage, appreciated its genuineness. Eva, however, is horrified at what she has done and tries desperately to atone for what her passionate display reveals. Kevin, though, is not fooled by her attempts to convince him that she is sorry and that what she had done was wrong, because, Eva writes: “He clearly believed that he had found me out. He had glimpsed behind the curtain, and no amount of cooing and snack food would erase a vision at least as indelible as a first encounter with parental sex” (241).

Eva is uncomfortable with Kevin knowing her true feelings, just as she is uncomfortable with sharing them with anyone else. Yet, in ambivalent parent-child relationships, Wexler notes, there is a creative process in feeling hatred, because “stirring hatred in the other, containing, and responding to hatred allows the mother and child dyad to know that each has been able to have an effect on the other person” (159). Hence, they may even enjoy the feelings they kindle in each other. When, for example, Eva confiscates Kevin’s squirt gun she relates that “[h]e hated [her] with all his being, and [she] was happy as a clam” (177). Likewise, Kevin loves antagonising his mother and enjoys making her feel uncomfortable. As a teenager he intentionally masturbates where she can both hear and see him. When she slams the open door of the bathroom he is using, she hears his devious dry cackle and surmises: “Knowing I can see – I think it excites him” (350) There is something decidedly Oedipal about this incident, for not only does Kevin luxuriate in her extreme discomfort, it appears to titillate

him. There are hints throughout the letters that much of what Kevin does is motivated by his own ambivalent feelings towards his mother. While he claims to hate her he keeps her photograph in his cell. He also tells the television interviewer to leave his mother alone. Yet killing Franklin and Celia appear to be the worst possible way to hurt his mother, suggesting that she is actually the target of his discontent (and, if one considers the possible Oedipal argument, eliminates competition for her love). Kevin confirms this when Eva asks him why he did not kill her too, saying: “When you’re putting on a show, you don’t shoot the audience” (460). Her response – “You mean leaving me alive was the best revenge” (460) – suggests that she understands that this has been about her all along.

Phipps contends that Eva and Kevin are not that different for both have adopted an ironic, proud persona and that Eva actually recognises in her son a projection of her own “inner detachment or disconnection from [her] surroundings” (112). The only time Kevin lets down his mask – his impenetrable aloofness – is when he is sick, an episode that gives Eva a glimpse of what it would be like to mother a boy who wants her affection. For two weeks, when he is ten, Kevin has a high fever during which he is “a completely different person” (279). He places his arm around his mother’s neck, puts his head in her lap and clutches at her while she cares for him and reads to him. He also drops all his nonchalance and snide comments, instead appearing grateful and dependent on her nurturing. Once he is better, Eva notes that “the set of his mouth was once more askew [...]. *Better?* Well not to me” (282). She treasures the intimacy between them when he is ill and is disappointed when he reverts to the cool persona that she believes he is upholding. In a letter, she tells Franklin: “I achieved an appreciation for how much energy and commitment it must have taken him the rest of the time to generate this other boy (or boys)” (280), suggesting that she feels that sick Kevin is the real Kevin and that cold, indifferent Kevin is all well-maintained posturing. This episode demonstrates contradictory impulses within Eva for she enjoys the more ‘natural’ mother-son relationship of dependence and closeness during Kevin’s illness but is also able to identify with her son’s persona, possibly because it is a reflection of one she too projects to the world as a superior-feeling outsider.

Further contradictions exist with Eva’s relationship with her own mother whom Eva derides for her fears and ridiculous excuses as to why she need not leave the home. Her mother’s agoraphobia resulted in her young children (Eva and her brother Giles) having to negotiate with the outside world on her behalf, inevitably leading to Eva having to take on adult tasks

for which she resents her mother. She tells Franklin that “[she] was always horrified by the prospect of turning out like [her] mother” (35) and admits that her choice of profession was inspired by the secret knowledge that she was terrified of travelling and wanted to do it to prove that she could overcome her fears. Thus, she admits: “I *am* much like my mother” (36). Over the ensuing years, Eva hardly sees her mother because “[she]’d been remote and unsparing” (130), which suggests that Eva now recognises that she had been too harsh on her mother. When she adds that “[w]hat Kevin was missing was a mother like [hers]” (131), she further concedes that her mother was loving, nurturing and warm – attributes she now values. After *Thursday*, Eva’s mother is the only person who does not judge her and is the one person to whom Eva can turn. Ironically, Kevin’s actions isolate Eva from the rest of society but draw her closer to her mother. After Kevin is arrested and Eva returns to an empty house, she says: “I felt a surging, regressive urge to call my mother” (452). This is the one relationship in the novel in which real healing takes place but, in a further irony, it is the relationship that may be responsible for forming Eva’s harsh, aloof persona which she believes protects her from the world.

Messer argues that maternal work is a “dual and contradictory experience” since it is “an activity and life-world that [is] oppressive, but also affirming” (10). Women, however, seldom admit to the internal conflict these contradictory affective experiences bring to the fore, since they are led to believe that motherhood should be a pleasant experience. It is therefore necessary for Eva to give voice to her maternal ambivalence within the private realm of her letters, since fictional letters are a conceit associated with secrecy, confession and interiority. Her epistles are also linked to the characteristics of her son’s crime which has isolated her and turned her into an example of extreme maternal failure, a label which she both rejects and embraces. Shriver’s depiction of motherhood differs from Mariama Bâ’s and Alice Walker’s for their texts unequivocally ratify motherhood as complex but affirming and part of self-actualisation and healing in the face of patriarchal disenfranchisement and violence. In Shriver’s text, motherhood itself is an institution of residual oppression. This should be seen in a feminist context which does not shy away from exposing and attempting to break down this last bastion of masculine control over women’s bodies, women’s time, women’s careers and their self-concepts. That this exploration takes place in the private mode of the letter, however, shows that such a critique is still subdued albeit that the letter mode with its connotations of sharing does open the issue up to public consideration.

What Shriver's epistolary novel shows is that, even in the so-called post-feminist twenty-first century, women remain reluctant to publically address the ways in which motherhood can be oppressive. Also, unlike Ramatoulaye and Celie for whom sisterhood and female bonds provide crucial avenues for self-expression, Eva cannot confide her failings and uncertainties in a letter to a female friend since Kevin's crime has impacted on all her relationships. Shriver thus uses the letter mode to demonstrate Eva's extreme, unremitting social isolation and disconnection. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters of this thesis, letters conventionally lead traumatised victims towards healing, forgiveness and closure, but Eva's trauma as a result of Franklin's and Celia's deaths and her fear that she has contributed to them make it impossible for Eva to forgive herself and reach closure and healing from her grief. Her final words – "Ever your loving wife, Eva" (468) – suggest that her mourning for her addressee will never be over.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

From its very beginnings, the epistolary mode has been associated with the subjective description of emotional pain. Since trauma is by its very nature pain which is unresolved, it is, as Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs” and may be a “crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (in Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 5). The epistolary mode thus lends itself to a narrator who explores traumatic events because writing about them to someone else is an attempt to assimilate the experience for oneself whilst calling to witness that which can only be beheld in the addressee’s mind’s eye through this retelling. So it is, then, that when isolated, cornered, seduced, under threat of rape, brutalised by sexual, verbal and/or physical abuse or confronting overwhelming personal loss, the protagonist (usually a woman) turns to letter writing as a way of voicing her pain, both to herself and to someone who validates her experience by responding to it. This is the case in both Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* in which writing to another woman facilitates the process of mourning and healing of the protagonist through self-expression and leading to her social re-integration. In stark contrast, the protagonist in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* writes letters to her deceased husband from whom there can be no ameliorative response to facilitate the achievement of resolution and consolation, and she will, the novel suggests, remain socially isolated as a consequence of the stigma attached to her son’s crime.

Kevin’s crime is a very public one since it is exhaustively covered by the media. This thesis has shown that the private correspondence in epistolary fiction invariably reveals something of the larger public arena that surrounds the correspondents. Nicky Hallet contends that, “[i]f wider conceptual spaces can be opened up by examination of the intricacies of one-to-one exchange, so too can wider social structures be revealed” (114). All three primary texts discussed in this thesis show that women’s private correspondence demonstrates the ways in which they are constrained and silenced by the broader societies within which they find themselves. Elizabeth Campbell argues that for women who experience multiple marginalisations, particularly in the later part of the twentieth century, their writing “reflects their experience as the ‘other’ in a culture in which they have traditionally been voiceless and

thus powerless” (333). Ramatoulaye’s letters reveal the extent to which colonialism, religion and indigenous patriarchal practices have all contributed to the subjugation of Senegalese women. Celie’s letters show the legacy of slavery in the violence still perpetuated against black people and how black women bear the brunt of black men’s rage at their disempowerment and emasculation. Both of these texts, according to Campbell, demonstrate how the “epistolary novel and women’s writing subvert the language and values of the dominant culture” (333). Although Eva, unlike Celie and Ramatoulaye, is not marginalised by virtue of her race, as an Armenian she is conscious of the fact that she is an outsider in the conservative, predominantly white, middle-class, suburban culture that prevails in the America where she lives. Her letters to Franklin reveal ways in which this culture pervades public discourse and thus intrudes upon the private lives of women. The role of the media in moulding this discourse as well as stimulating Kevin’s desire to be famous (a desire which can be seen as a pathologised version of the American Dream), is critiqued through Eva’s private letters.

The interplay between private and public is enhanced in the letter mode because the document of the letter is sent out to an addressee. This study has demonstrated that the sharing of traumatic events with another results in the letter occupying a liminal space between the public and the private. Since the external reader intrudes upon this space it further opens up the permeable boundaries between these oppositions. There is a paradox in voyeuristically engaging in a private correspondence and observing the dynamics of the epistolary relationship, but the epistolary mode is one that writers use precisely because of its inherent paradoxes. The paradoxical absent-present dynamic infuses each letter since the external reader is always aware of the ‘presence’ of the absent addressee in the letter. This is uncomplicated in the case of Ramatoulaye since she writes to her closest friend but the absent God that Celie writes to compounds our sense of her initial isolation and trauma because she will receive no comforting reply. Shriver uses the absent-present dynamic of the letter to dupe the external reader. Since Franklin is made present throughout Eva’s letters, we do not at first suspect that he is dead. The epistolary mode is thus a vital part of Shriver’s strategy in conveying not only Eva’s inability to admit Franklin’s death to herself (and thus demonstrates her trauma and lack of closure) but also to surprise the external reader with this revelation.

Writers have always consciously employed the conceits enabled by the epistolary mode. From its beginnings it allowed the author to ‘speak’ with a female voice since women were writing letters in real life. Although letters can be written by either sex, they were viewed as the most authentic way to represent how women spoke. While it may be construed that it was transgressive for male authors to write with a female voice, feminist critics also point out that these voices were always confined to narrow domestic spaces and invariably showed what Perry terms “the politics of their sexuality” (52). Even though *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a recent epistolary novel, we still see these sexual politics at play, especially with regards to the way in which motherhood is examined. Eva has a career outside of the home yet she is expected to give it up when she becomes a mother, Franklin places very high demands on her to fulfil his ideals of mothering and when Kevin commits his terrible crimes, Eva is the one held accountable by society and even tried in a court of law. Her mothering is publically scrutinised and she is judged and ostracised by all.

This shows that although epistolary fictions have been written for centuries, in many respects their functional and thematic characteristics have remained the same. Fictional letters are still written to an addressee who is characterised as a confidant, and the relationship between narrator and addressee continues to imply trust, confession and secrecy. Letters continue to have a “distancing yet mediatory nature, [which] frees the writer to say what she cannot say in the presence of the addressee” (Campbell 336). Because letters give the narrator freedom to express that which is usually hidden, they are often used to confide private traumas but in doing so also expose the greater public traumas that may surround or have influenced the narrator. Some recent epistolary novels testify to this in how they use letters to document the horrors of the holocaust, for instance. Both Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and his *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) use letters to reveal the traumas involved in surviving the Jewish genocide. Texts like these employ the letter as a means to flick open the intimacies of trauma, with the body of the letter exposing the violation of the human body and the body of history which is lost when people’s stories are eviscerated. These texts show private experiences of crimes which are very much part of the collective consciousness and recent global memory. Other examples include Jessica Brockmole’s *Letters from Skye* (2013) which is set in the First World War and Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows’ *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society* (2008) which is set on Guernsey during the Nazi occupation. Both texts use letters to demonstrate the awful effects of war on civilians. John Berger’s *From A to X* (2008) demonstrates the results of rebelling

against an oppressive fascist regime since its correspondents are lovers separated by the husband's imprisonment. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* also uses letters to explore the aftermath of the terror of 9/11. Interestingly, this novel's letter writer is a young boy which shows that although letters are no longer associated with the female voice in particular, they are nonetheless still often written by those who are powerless, voiceless and vulnerable. A further study into how recent epistolary fictions – such as those referred to briefly above – reflect these voices would be beneficial to the field of epistolary criticism.

This study outlined a history of how the epistolary mode came to be associated with the confined female voice and how this association had dissipated by the nineteenth century. It then explored how three fairly recent texts re-appropriated this mode – and harkened to its origins – in order to critique the various constraints which continue to impact on women despite the advances made by feminism. Since the study focused on these particular texts, it of necessity left out many other recent epistolary fictions. A further study into how the letter was used by postmodernists in the last two decades of the twentieth century would therefore also broaden our perspective on how this mode influences our reading of narrative voice. It became a feature of many post-modern texts – like A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) – to bring together fragments and different viewpoints without a single regulating principle such as being controlled by an omniscient narrator. A collage or eclectic mix of narrative devices in these texts would often include letters. This also meant that the role of the reader as detective, who has to figure out the gestalt from these fragments, became all the more important.

An additional aspect of contemporary uses of the epistolary mode in fiction which warrants further critical exploration is its transformation by the technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. E-pistolary texts, for example, do not contain the physical trace of the writer (like handwriting, smudges, ink stains that are referred to in the letters) and can thus, according to Margaretta Jolly, no longer be “fetishised as evocative of a woman's body and identity, the synecdoche of their historical position as objects of exchange” (26). A study of how e-pistolary fictions maintain some elements of their genealogical antecedents and have altered others would therefore add much to current epistolary criticism. Also of interest would be an examination of how epistolary fictions translate to film. A number of epistolary texts have been filmed and most do not visually display the letter writing process but instead reflect interiority through voice-overs and flashbacks. There are film versions of de Laclos'

Dangerous Liaisons, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC miniseries), Stoker's *Dracula*, Wilder's *The Ides of March*, Walker's *The Color Purple*, Byatt's *Possession*, Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Torday's *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. A comparison of these filmic interpretations with their source material would add to our understanding of the interplay between the different mediums of conventional literature and visual representation on film.

This thesis has therefore set out to contribute to current research on the resurgence in the employment of the epistolary mode in contemporary fiction by reading three novels as representative of particular socio-historical moments in relation to the literary history of letter-writing, particularly when used as a device to give voice to women's experiences of trauma. The epistolary mode enables a narrative point of view which can expose the private world of women's sexuality, domestic intimacies and the socially loaded concept of mothering. Both Bâ's and Walker's texts demonstrate the constraints which limit women to the domestic realm but also affirm healing, female connections and the restorative nature of motherhood. I concluded with Shriver's text because it is indicative of a shift in the use of the epistolary mode. Her novel unsettles the very certainties of reciprocity and relationship with which the mode has always presented the reader and instead creates, through its unreliable and ambivalent narrator, a sense of dislocation, ostracism and unending mourning.

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