

## Focus on “ Topics in American Literature ” : A Love Letter to Teaching Epistolary Texts

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# Focus on “Topics in American Literature”: A Love Letter to Teaching Epistolary Texts

Katherine E. Bishop

## Abstract

*Letters are underutilized but exceedingly valuable resources for any class but are particularly key for literature courses: they reveal important historical details, emphasize character, tone, and setting, as well as often embodying the practice of close reading. Literature composed of letters is known as epistolary literature. In this short essay, a love letter to the form, I briefly explain what epistolary literature is, why it is important, and how I use it within the active learning framework at Miyazaki International College (MIC) to support a range of learners. To that end, in this brief essay I focus on an epistle-centric course I developed for MIC under the heading of “Topics in American Literature.” Throughout this essay, I will limn some (but not all) of the readings my students and I found particularly effective, discuss some of the contextualizations we employed, and describe assignments and approaches that have been especially successful. I conclude with the course’s reading list.*

**Keywords:** epistolary literature, close reading, pedagogy, active learning, letters

Literature is central to the humanities. It helps us understand what it means to be human within this world—and any other worlds we can imagine. Perhaps no other type of literature is more human than the epistolary, a form focused on and formed by the drippings, outpourings, and sediment of the daily lives, loves, and posturings of humanity: diaries, journals, blog posts, text messages, telegrams, and, above all, letters. These letters may have been intended to be private, as Kathy Acker’s emailed missives to McKenzie Wark, now published in *I’m Very Into You* (2015), almost certainly were, they may have been intended for publication, or at least posterity, as some now think of Wark’s letters to Acker, or as are open letters first published in a public forum.<sup>1</sup> Epistolary literature is often composed of the musings of one person to themselves and their recording of daily life (as in a diary), the recording of events (as in a journal), or correspondence between two or more people or entities, as in correspondence of various types. It is personal, personable, voyeuristic. It involves the reader as an active participant. It is a perfect vehicle for active literary practices as well as for myriad topics ranging from the history of the book, daily lives and intimate thoughts of quotidian and famous people, and rhetoric at work. In this short essay, a love letter to epistolary literature, I briefly explain what epistolary literature is, why it is important, and how I use it within the active learning framework at Miyazaki International College (MIC) to support a range of learners. To that end, in this brief essay I focus on a course I developed for MIC to fit the umbrella of “Topics in American Literature” that is an homage to the epistle. Throughout this essay, I will limn some (but not all) of the readings my students and I found particularly effective, discuss some of the contextualizations we employed, and describe assignments and approaches that have been especially successful.

Letters are ideal fodder for any literature class, first and foremost, because of their literary value and impact on the rise of the novel. Many argue that some of the first novels, especially in

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the circumstances surrounding Wark and Acker’s correspondence, I have cited the text by editor rather than author in the apparatus below.

English, were epistolary, looking especially to Aphra Behn's three-volume series *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* from the 1680s and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), which helped to popularize the novel as a mode and epistolary novels as a genre. Audiences were used to the form of letter writing by the time the novel came about; letters were how people received tales from the lives of others and was how they told the stories of their own lives, crafting it for an audience—even just an audience of one, if they were writing in a diary. The novel, after all, stemmed from the practice of letter writing, the practice of narrating one's life to another, of recounting one's travels, as Petrarch pioneered in the fourteenth century, so they say, of courtship and/or seduction under cover of propriety, as Hélöise and Abelard, tragically, famously, modeled. Even at their most banal, letters provide drama of a sort that easily sorts itself into textual intrigue. For ages before (and after) radios and computers came about, families in drawing rooms and crowds in pubs alike would read from the letters they received to share news, gossip, or just an outside perspective. In so doing, these sharers opened the expanse of the world to their listeners, who, remember, were often constrained to a much smaller area than we are today, with much fewer sources of information. Adding to their dramatic effects, letters are sometimes intercepted in real life, causing real consequences. People are fired. Hearts are broken. Wars are won and lost (see the case of General Lee's Lost Order 191 for a thrilling real-life example of the consequences of misdirected mail). Who among us has not received (or, gasp, sent) a misaddressed email, a mistaken 'reply all' meant for one, or an otherwise intended text?

We can relate to letters. And so can our students. Letters, more than almost any other type of text, allow the reader to step into the inner circle of the text, to serve as an interlocutor, as a fly on the wall of a private exchange. We readers are there as the story unfolds, creating a sense of urgency and of presence that helps our learners to feel connected to the works at hand, the settings, the characters, the atmosphere, the motivations, the stakes.

While any literature class benefits from the inclusion of epistles, and any Topics class at MIC could be focused on epistolary works, I chose to center my "Topics in American Literature" class on epistles, in part, because of the importance the form played in shaping the United States as a nation. Where would North America be if Christopher Columbus had written about the Taíno people differently in his diaries; where would the United States be if the Revolutionaries of 1776 hadn't declared their independence from the crown in what amounts to an open letter, as the Declaration of Independence can be regarded?

We begin the semester with excerpts from Winnifred Gallagher's *How the Post Office Created America: A History* (2016) and *Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service* by Devin Leonard (2017) to assist us in understanding the history of postal systems throughout human history and the specific history of the postal service and the ramifications of its rise on the United States. From the colonial government onward, the postal service helped the United States to build its infrastructure, contributing to roads, address schematics, and locally-marked means of identification. It has long distributed newspapers, playing an important role in rallying revolutionaries, creating circuits of information, and connecting far-flung areas with a sense of centrality. The burgeoning postal service helped to unify the thirteen original colonies, keeping them together, as the first postmaster Benjamin Franklin delivered newspapers (mostly his) with letters, creating a network of knowledge that unified the colonists into what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community. The unfairness of the Stamp Act (which taxed all paper, not only correspondence) brought with it taxation without representation and a growing resentment toward a colonial government that leached income from the laboring colonists also contributed to the rise of the United States of America. This sense of connection also contributed to the growth of the United States: settlers were far more willing to travel far afield beyond the relative safety of the eastern seaboard with the promise of a postal tether maintaining personal, political, and financial

ties to their homes and to the inner spaces of domesticity represented by letters, sharing news of home and hearth.

The postal service further added to the air of mystery and manifest destiny in the growing myth of dominance, particularly through the Pony Express and other mail services that helped to domesticate the image of the West as an extension of ‘home.’ The short-lived Pony Express, which raced letters across the western portion of the then-territories at a supposed loss of \$5 per letter until the telegraph poles took over the routes in 1860, became iconic for bravery, temerity, and derring-do in the face of danger and symbolic of chivalric knights errant questing across the frontier. In “Topics in American Literature,” we consider it through a number of cultural artifacts, including Bret Harte’s 1860 poem “The Pony Express” and Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872), looking as well at its impact on the later rise of Wild West shows. Harte’s pulsing rhythms mimicking the hoof beats of riders, “heralds of victory” as he calls them, streaming across the land; he dedicates an entire stanza to the rapid movement of the riders and another to the types of landscapes they pass through. The Pony Express service only survived for eighteen months but the myth endures in postage stamps and dreams of ‘taming’ the so-called Wild West, of the “times of adventure, of battle and song” Harte describes. This pairs well with an excerpt from Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*, in which he contends with the romantic transformation and mythification of the Pony Express rider in the observers’ eyes.

We continue to delve into Twain’s consideration of those old chestnuts of American culture, manifest destiny, the empire of liberty, and expansion in excerpts from his *Letters from the Sandwich Islands*, sometimes published as *Letters from Hawai’i*, a collection of travel letters he was commissioned to produce for the *Alta* about his trip to the kingdom of Hawai’i in 1866. These provide a springboard for us to learn about the form of the travel letter and travel blogs today. Students build on these ideas to create travel letters (or blog posts) of their own about Miyazaki, presenting information and images on a beloved location and then reflecting on their own choices and how their travel letters compare to those we read in class both orally and in a written assignment.

Beyond the institutional postal service and its function, though, letters worked behind the scenes to create the United States as we know it today. In response to this, most people would nod and say something about letters between the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin’s virtue journal, maybe mention Crèvecoeur, de Tocqueville, even Columbus or Las Casas, and, yes, all of these are important, as gestured to above. But even more formative, letters have historically provided spaces for voices who did not have the power of the men listed in the previous part of this paragraph. Throughout history, these voices were rarely published publicly but made it to their audiences via more private networks. Small, personal records like letters help modern readers to see what life was like beyond the master narratives of history. They contain recipes, poems, menus, habits, details of daily life, and otherwise color in the world in ways that public records cannot always do. These legacies of the mundane were significant; often, they created psychological and, in a few cases, physical outlets. Letters historically expanded the small spaces of the home. This was especially important for many women who were barred from otherwise publishing. Emily Dickinson, for example, published very few poems in her lifetime but shared many within her voluminous correspondence, tucking particularly intimate moments into correspondence with her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Dickinson.

Another woman, Linda Brent (also known as Harriet Jacobs), used letters to catalyze her own self-emancipation. She hid from the man who called himself her master in such a small space that she could barely move but in which she was free. She did this for seven years. Letters allowed her to communicate with her loved ones—and to throw the scent off of her hiding hole; she had friends post notes to her grandmother from faraway cities, letters that her nemesis seized and

examined, helping maintain the illusion that she was far from his grasp. As we discuss in class in conjunction with excerpts from her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), letters provided her with a small sort of freedom, the freedom to communicate, to express herself, and to evade recapture and re-enslavement. They also provided a foundation for her legitimacy, as was so often the case in such narratives of enslavement. Lydia Maria Childs, one of the most famed white female activists of the nineteenth century, was among those whose voices joined Brent's and lent authority to her narrative. Such letters also garland Solomon Northrup's 1853 narrative of enslavement in *Twelve Years a Slave*, highlighting the credibility of his story for incredulous readers. Likewise, letters were also his path to freedom, as we explore in class; after being kidnapped and sold, despite his status as free, Northrup used letters (and his family and friends used quite a bit of persistence) to re-empower himself. Along with excerpts from the text, students view the 2013 film of the same title, responding to it in a brief written assignment in preparation for class discussion. Scaffolding our understanding of narratives of enslavement are advertisements for "runaway slaves," which in themselves provide mini-biographies of lives otherwise buried, the history of enslavement in the United States, and hint at epic tales of heroic battles for freedom.

Complementary to building and solidifying connections with texts is celebrating diversity and valuing the many complex worldviews that complement our own. My students report that although it is a major challenge to understand the Southern dialect in which Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is written, learning how to understand it is worthwhile. Many want to stop reading initially but then reconsider: they realize we should not turn away from others' stories because they are different to our own or hard for us to access. In the end, they unanimously agree that the novel and the reading processes it engenders are invaluable resources for learning about American literature and culture as well as promoting social justice and global citizenship. Moreover, a number of students have expressed how *The Color Purple* has helped them to realize greater self acceptance and a feeling of greater self-worth, to appreciate their differences and individuality.

Along with Walker, we cover contrapuntal texts, including Blues legend Bessie Smith's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," a song alluded to in the novel as both Smith and the Blues are integral to the world of the novel. To the same end, we study the history of quilting in the United States, which some scholars have connected to the Underground Railroad and abolitionist efforts. While it is difficult to prove this one way or the other, understanding quilting helps students to understand the symbolism of quilts and sewing in. In this novel, Walker draws on the world-building nature of correspondence. *The Color Purple* is ever a class favorite, telling the protagonist Celie's story and showing her growth through a diary of letters as she defeats her misanthropic and misogynistic husband and finds love. Letters help Celie to find her sister and, as importantly, herself. To encourage students to look further into character, form, and material history, they are asked to write a letter to a character from another character from any text. They are encouraged to emulate the style and syntax of their chosen person and to think about not just what they would write but how. Additionally, they reflect separately on these choices, providing textual evidence.

To further students' understanding of the history and culture depicted in Walker's award-winning novel, they watch the eleven-time Academy Award nominated film (1985), writing a film review, which is excellent critical writing practice. Moreover, because *The Color Purple* is a long unit, students supplement our frameworks by researching a historical or cultural element that interests them and sharing their findings with the class and as a paper. Topics range from comparisons of fashion at different price points to better understanding Prohibition. These materials lead to lively discussion.

Rounding out this unit are open letters such as Jourdan Anderson's 1865 "Letter From a Freedman to His Old Master," first published in the *Cincinnati Commercial*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s

1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” first published with his consent in *Liberation*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New Leader*, and James Baldwin’s 1962 “Letter to My Nephew,” which first appeared in *Progressive*. These provide opportunities to think about the legacy of the framing texts, building upon them to understand how foundations of the United States, narratives of enslavement, and mediums of resistance contributed to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. These letters also provide opportunities to examine open letters as a mode and to introduce foundational tenets of rhetoric such as audience, forum, intent, and appeals to emotion, logic, credibility, and community. Students additionally write open letters of their own, thinking about how to persuade a wide public on a stance regarding controversies that impact their own lives.

In the class’s third unit, we consider experimental forms that epistles have taken in American literature, moving through music, poetry, art, and speculative futures. We follow up on Walker’s productive estrangement with a series of poems, for example, including the perennial favorites, “This is Just to Say,” by William Carlos Williams, a 1934 poem about eating plums and the wonders of the quotidian that my classes adore parodying, and Craig Raine’s 1979 poem “A Martian Writes a Postcard Home,” a study in metaphors that alienates the things we think we know, such as dreams and time and poetry and belonging, and asks us to reconsider our assumptions, positing that we tend to see with our “eyelids shut.” We play a game similar to Taboo to prepare for it, an excellent exercise to build fluency, and then work together to pair images to the abstracted comparisons within the poem, before digging further into them. Students also create their own “riddle” metaphors, which we share as a class. Raine’s poem pairs delightfully well with Margaret Atwood’s “Postcard,” 1987, a consideration of the ramshackle reality behind our idylls and our paradoxical ability to love despite imperfections.

How can letters be more than just letters, we ask before prodding the script for A. R. Gurney’s epistolary play *Love Letters* (1988). How can thinking of drama through correspondence make us reconsider both forms? And where will epistles go in the future? How will they affect our relationships with ourselves and with one another and with technology? To that end, we consider scenes from *Star Wars* (1977), *The Martian* (2015), *The Postman* (1997), *Her* (2013), and *Final Space* (2018) as well as music videos such as the Postal Service’s “Such Great Heights” (2003).

Moving along the experimental corridor, we come to memoir. The Dear Data project, a year-long exchange of postcard infographics by graphic designers in which they capture often lost details of their lives, such as types of doors they used and when, when and why they laughed and with whom, or complaints they made or thought of making, returns the everyday to the spotlight, much like William Carlos Williams and his plums. The Dear Data project provides us with a fulcrum for reconsidering the stories we tell about ourselves and how we tell them. What becomes part of our histories? How do we visualize our lives through media, through our emails, through various ways we edit and share ourselves? To complement this unit, students follow an underexplored path in their own lives through a week and create their own visualizations of this path on postcards along with reflective essays. They then share their work. Topics range from app use to smoking cessation efforts to songs sung to oneself. Sure, students regularly groan in anticipation of this assignment, worrying that it will take a lot of time, and just as regularly report appreciating the new insight this self-exploration provides for them.

Self-exploration and reflection are integral components of this class. In accordance with the theme (and my own teaching philosophy), students reflect on their own goals in letters to themselves and to me three times throughout the semester. In these letters, they outline what their goals were for the term (or long term), how our class can help them to reach those goals, what they can do to support themselves, and how I can best help them. These letters provide a comfortable and safe space. Emails can seem distant, students have said. They are so black and white and full of red lines. Students worry about getting things right in emails. The cursor blinks at them. Office

hours can also be intimidating. But letters? My students find they feel safer, less formal. As a complement to these check-in letters, students (here as in my other classes) also chart their growth along the course goals rubric at three points in the semester. These artifacts help me to adjust foci from time to time and, just as importantly, help the learners in my classes to stay focused.

Correspondence also helps learners in my classes to help one another to stay focused in this class. Building community can be difficult in any situation but especially in classrooms in which cohort, language proficiency, and cultural norms vary wildly, as they can do at MIC. So, to augment discussion, and to help my students to connect, they are tasked with writing ten letters throughout the course of the semester. At least five of these letters must be to classmates (though five (in addition to their check-in notes) can be to me). They can use any materials they wish and write about anything under the sun—with a few ground rules. For one, of course, these letters have to be respectful. They also have to include class-relevant remarks. They can expand on something related to the class, ponder on a line, add to discussion, or relate to a character for at least a few lines. As a bonus, they are encouraged to include some of the highlighted phrases and vocabulary we cover in class. All letters need to be “posted” to the mailbox we keep in the General Affairs office. And, crucially, all letters have to be photographed and emailed to me. These letters push them to be bold and to reach out to one another. It is always a bit challenging to get this correspondence project off the ground, but as it counts for a fifth of their grade, most do it in a timely manner. And then some keep writing. The glories they come up with! Highlights include using stationery to emphasize a theme, wax sealed envelopes, and friendships formed. Some students comment that despite having taken multiple classes with other course participants, they had never really talked to one another before “Topics in American Literature” but there become friends.

My students learn to worry less about perfection when they write physical letters than emails. Scratched out phrases, I remind them, are part of the personality of letters. The physical act of writing to one another frees them, for a moment, of the compressing fear of being ‘wrong’: orthography and grammar are important, yes, but even more so, I would argue, is communication. There’s something about putting a pen to paper and leaving your own mark upon the page that they respond to well. There’s something to giving and receiving the small gift of a sealed envelope that they hunger for in today’s pixelated world. There’s something freeing in allowing oneself to exist on a page, unformatted by the press of Times New Roman. There’s something human and utterly delightful, my students agree.

The specialized focus of “Topics in American Literature” encourages community, fosters communication, and enables students to boldly engage with the course materials. Students feel connected to the texts, come to feel connected to one another, and thus are able to become more comfortable in discussion, one-on-one, in groups, and as a class. Letters are not the only way to breed success in the literature classroom but they are neglected enough that they warrant spotlighting benefits of using them and a few ways to employ them here. And, of course, letters are often short, contained works, perfect for students for whom English is not their native language or for whom confidence is not high: such letters allow a sense of mastery when completed. I have employed epistolary literature in other classes, looking to texts such as Nick Bantock’s *Griffin and Sabine* (1991) in “Literary Genres and Trends,” Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) in “British Literature,” and so forth and plan to write more on this for *Comparative Culture* in the future.

I encourage you to use letters as well, Gentle Reader, in whichever application suits your classes best. Should you like to see a full syllabus or discuss this class further, I can be reached at [kbishop@sky.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp](mailto:kbishop@sky.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp) or Miyazaki International College 1405 Kano Kiyotake-cho, Miyazaki-shi, Miyazaki-ken, 889-1605, JAPAN. Go ahead; drop me a line.

In lieu of a works cited list, I present a supplementary introductory reading list of texts referenced in and influential to this essay.

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