THE MANIPULATIVE NATURE OF LETTERS IN 19TH CENTURY BRITISH TEXTS WITH A FOCUS ON AUSTEN AND WILDE

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Epistles, within or without the framework of a novel, may have the authority to manipulate. They can plausibly have a deep impact on the thinking processes and emotional reactions of not only readers but also of the writers. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth, after his failed proposal, is a petition that forces readers in the role of judge and jury; the written is substituted for the writer’s physical actions. With *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele’s short letter indicating she is married moves Edward to action and attempts to removes her guilt; it thus helps shapes two relationships. Very near the conclusion of *Emma*, Frank filters his somewhat explanatory letter through his stepmother in order, ironically, to make his voice heard; he attempts to recreate his identity through an epistle but doesn’t quite succeed. Furthermore, the deceptively simple note of Lord Henry to Dorian after Sybil Vane’s death in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrates how one can condemn without risk, using an extended, unorthodox form of the letter as paper mask. With *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily proves to readers/audience and Algernon how letters can make the false real; she wields the sometimes disturbing power of the written word. The analysis of these letters seems to coalesce in *De Profundis*, a synecdoche of letters within letters, in which the writer is the author, the character, and the reader. Using critical discourse that focuses on epistolary forms and letters
both within and without novels, this thesis seeks to illustrate how letters are manipulative and further how they impact narrative arc, readers, writers, and recipients.
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is dedicated to everyone who guided me through overflowing bookshelves
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INTRODUCTION

In *The Post Card*, Jacques Derrida begins his critical discourse, that is to say the portion of the book that begins after his letters or *envois*, with a warning. So too shall I begin with a warning on the same subject matter, that of letters. Like photographs, they give the appearance of truth but are often tools of manipulation, tools that both the author and the author’s invented characters can wield against both internal and external readers. Specifically, within the framework of a novel, letters work in various ways to manipulate both external and internal readers, often revealing information in a particular way that impacts the narrative arc, character development, or both. The one exception to this, as pertaining to this thesis, is Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*, which is a stand-alone letter. Diane Cousineau claims that “as quickly as the letter invites belief in sincerity and revelation, it summons up images of betrayal and deceit” (28). A writer exists as well as the intended and unintended addresseees; the writer has motives for using ink and paper and should reasonably be aware that, unlike a diary entry per se, this letter will be read. Manipulation is innate because the writer has to have an agenda; whether that agenda is innocent or not, it is still, usually, a careful calculation.

As a photograph can be retouched to give a reality which suits the creator, so too can a letter be tweaked, for example, with certain words to achieve the appearance of reality that is dependent on what the letter-writer wishes to convey or portray. Such is the nature of the letter. Consequently, Janet Altman states, “The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him” (88). This thesis then seeks to not only argue but to analyze this innate dual-sided nature of letters: truth
warring with misleading language or, perhaps more appropriately, lies wrapped up in the guise of truth. Each letter discussed in this paper will be analyzed to uncover its unique manipulative characteristics. For instance, how does the delivery, the physicality, and the actual contents of the letter work in conjunction to shape and guide characters’ and readers’ responses? In short, what are the methods through which the writers are able to bring about a particular effect on readers and how do they work in conjunction in each epistle? A letter becomes a character in its own right and thus has significant weight in the novel or text in which it appears. Again, *De Profundis* is the exception though it can be argued that the narrative arc it appears in is Oscar Wilde’s life.

Much like a character who may often come into contact with unexpected people, sometimes an epistle goes beyond its intended recipient or recipients. Jacques Lacan ends his seminar on *The Purloined Letter* with the words, “A letter always arrives at its destination” (53). I will explore how it arrives at that destination. Does it reach its destination or destinations through the machinations of the novel’s author, the letter-writer and/or the character, or both? Why is this important to how readers, within and without the text, comprehend it? While Lacan’s statement is certainly intriguing, it stops far too short. Janet Altman takes this one step further and writes that “very few letters are read by their intended recipients only” (95). Yet, her claim is far too bold. In fact, another of Lacan’s statements suits the ambiguity of the addressee far better: “Might a letter on which the sender retains certain rights then not quite belong to the person to whom it is addressed? Or might it be the latter was never the real receiver? For it
becomes clear that the addressee’s proprietorship of the letter may be no less debatable than that of anyone else into whose hands it comes” (41). His point is an intriguing one: who or what is in control? What constitutes an intended recipient? Who were Oscar Wilde’s intended recipients when he wrote *De Profundis*? In the letters of *The Post Card*, the writer, who is at once both Derrida and a separate entity, worries about this very possibility of interception; the writer constantly formulates ways in which a post card can be written so that it is only decipherable by two people. Again, the writer must work to manipulate letters to ensure privacy, which leads to Anne Bower’s claim that “the letter seems ‘simple’ and ‘traditional’ but with its layers of actual and fictional readers, with its special possibilities for rhetorical complications and manipulations, what purports to be such a personal and direct form of address can never be more than partly personal, partly authentic, partly direct” (169). While Bower proposed this as a despicable quality of letters, I propose in my thesis, through the writings of Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde, that this quality is exactly why the letter is used, so that it can guide and nudge readers’, internal and external, responses.

Here, we enter the tricky ground of authorial intent, which is not only difficult but treacherous ground to navigate. However, this thesis will attempt to remain on the very surface of these murky waters. For instance, Frank Churchill’s supposed intended recipient in *Emma* is only Mrs. Weston. Yet, this claim is convoluted. His manner of writing betrays knowledge of other intended recipients, and we, as readers, become one of them. In fact, in a matter of a few of the novel’s pages, the letter is read by two people significantly other than Mrs. Weston. In such instances, Diane Cousineau’s
claim becomes far easier to accept and even acquiesce to: “The letter as a source of the sincere and spontaneous outpouring of emotion immediately gives way to the letter as the site of calculated deliberation and deceitful intent” (28-29). However, this confusion is not relegated only to the pages of a novel. Anne Bower discusses Derrida’s intended recipient in *The Post Card*, unable to find a definitive answer but uncovering the artful deception: “The addressee is so elusive, all statements can also be read as theoretical statements addressed to the external reader(s)...there is no comfortable way to read this text” (161). Jacques Lacan’s claim foreshadows Anne Bower’s inability to decipher the specific addressee: “We are all the same treated-so much smoke in our eyes” (36). The smoke, unfortunately, can never clear. Yet, its presence may be why certain characters turn to the letter as a means of expressing certain emotions, ideas, and revelations. The letter appears to create an appearance of openness but it allows the writers to sometimes hide behind a paper curtain.

The authors also manipulate readers with letters, for the epistles give readers a sense that they are receiving an inside look at a character’s mind and even at the relationship developing between two characters. Janet Altman writes, “The epistolary form is unique among the first-person form in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading” (88). We readers generally receive the letters in their entirety. While this further develops our experience of reading, it also, simultaneously, fools us. An example of this can be seen in Gerald Maclean’s discussion of the part letters played in wars: “Letters were instruments of power that constructed, disciplined, and circulated a variety of subjects,” including forged resignations, which may explain why “letters
[were] continually intercepted during the civil war” (Maclean 180-181). A letter’s material form is part of its deception, part of the reason why it can deceive both fictional and real readers. The form is so important that it sometimes works as a physical extension of the writer and the writer’s identity.

Gerald Maclean discusses the book entitled Letters Home, which is a collection of soldiers’ letters. He analyses how these epistles had the power to move readers and suggests that the book’s success springs from the simple fact that these soldiers penned these letters with their hands; the book’s letters are almost like a physical embodiment of the soldiers, a way to touch and hear them without being in their presence. A comment in Derrida’s letters of The Post Card adds another layer to this reasoning; he writes in his letter while in the act of writing, “I am holding you stretched out on my knees” (32). While Elizabeth Bennet reads Mr. Darcy’s letter in the park, is she not, in a very real way, holding Mr. Darcy stretched out in her arms?

This idea of physicality also brings readers back to the idea of addressee, for Janet Altman states, “As a tangible document, even when intended for a single addressee, the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers” (109). In this light, Gerald Maclean’s distaste for the claim that the “humanist notion that letters necessarily threaten to reveal writers, that letters cannot help but risk exposing writers as they truly are, without disguise” is understandable. The writer is aware that his/her letter will be read, so the letters can never be entirely truthful; they are written for a purpose and are often veiled in some manner or another. Even if the writer has written the letter to be read by no one other than him/herself, he/she still
constitutes a reader, and we often try to deceive ourselves. Maclean’s rebuttal appears harsh but carries a lot of weight: “Whatever else they may be, letters are not and never can be an entirely private exchange involving two people. Letters may contain or reveal secrets but they can never themselves be secret” (177). They have simply too much power to be secrets themselves, to be truth in its entirety, to be stripped naked and without masks. So, Derrida’s written words, “we were already a crowd in that first envelope” (23) take on a new meaning. Every letter has a crowd attached to it, and the sole purpose of this paper is establish how that crowd is manipulated through letters, whether that letter appears in a novel like in Sense and Sensibility or on its own as in De Profundis.
PETITIONING WITH WRITTEN SPEECH:

HOW A LETTER FORCES READERS INTO THE ROLES OF JUDGE AND JURY

As stated in the introduction, the letter embodies an easy to overlook and understated power, the ability to not only convey the writer’s particular thoughts but to also draw forth certain reactions from the external and internal reader(s). The extent of this power and of its deceptive nature becomes clearer upon reading Gerald MacLean’s “Re-Sitting the Subject” in which he discusses the role letters played in the 1640’s, which he calls a time of “the war of words” (186): “letters of resignation, including forged ones, could anticipate victory by imagining an enemy already defeated. Such was the importance of revealing the defeated enemy subject, and such was the perceived power of epistolary discourse for achieving this purpose” (185-186). In these cases, the letter worked almost like a spy or soldier infiltrating not only the enemy camp but the home camp as well to plant the germ of certain ideas, which then led to particular reactions taking root within the readers’ hearts. Here is a very tangible way of visualizing the power of an epistle on the minds of its readers.

In Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Darcy attempts to make use of this power as he writes to Elizabeth Bennet an explanatory letter after she not only rejects his proposal but gives several reasons for her refusal. The impact and effect of his letter, however, works a bit more slowly and subtly than Maclean’s mentioned letters of resignation; yet, it too is imbued with the authority to alter the way in which both Elizabeth and external readers view the situations and events that have taken place thus far and that will take place in the future. Janet Altman’s words, “acts of reading constitute consequential
narrative events” (111), aid in showing the important role this piece of writing and its reading play on the development not only of the characters but also the external readers and the overall storyline. Mr. Darcy’s letter is not chockfull of emotions but rather deliberately an almost a dry litany of facts that hit the readers one after another, much like soldiers marching into battle.

Yet, the scene is not set in the 1640’s, and Mr. Darcy’s epistle is anything but a letter of resignation. Instead, his words form a sort of a petition from him to Elizabeth and from Jane Austen to the readers of *Pride and Prejudice*. The letter is oddly personal, containing detailed and painful recollections of both Darcy and Elizabeth’s family members. Contradictorily, it forces readers, Elizabeth included, to distance themselves from the action, to take the seat of judge and jury. This distancing is accomplished, in part, from an attempt to take feelings out of the realm of the epistle. Emotions are distinctly lacking in Darcy’s letter and, much like a courtroom, the focus is, instead, placed on factual evidence. Consequently, the letter is not meant to win over readers’ hearts but rather their minds. Austen provides a hint of this proposed reading when she reveals Elizabeth’s initial reaction to receiving the epistle: “With no expectation of pleasure, but with the strongest curiosity, Elizabeth opened the letter” (129). Over the years, the phrase “love is war” has been bandied about by heart-strung teenagers and critics alike but, in the matter of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is war, and Mr. Darcy’s letter works if not as the ammunition then certainly as a treaty bridging the gap between two enemy camps. This nudges external readers to mirror the epistle and, as a judge and jury, set emotions aside.
A strong well written petition requires a strong opening that is able to present a great deal of imperative information in very few words. Setting aside Mr. Darcy’s method of delivery for the moment, the opening of his letter reads far more like a legal document than a personal epistle. He has not only dated and timed the letter but has also put in the address from where it was written as is often done in petitions: “It was dated from Rosings, at eight o’clock in the morning” (Austen 129). Furthermore, the opening lines not only define who he is petitioning to but what he is petitioning or, more appropriately, not petitioning. This is not only a very shrewd move but makes his intentions extremely clear from the outset, for it is not a vengeful letter from a spurned lover; it is not the sort of letter that both internal and external reader(s) can reasonably expect at this point in the narrative arc. Janet Altman writes that “addressee-consciousness informs the act of writing itself” (Altman 111); simply put, the addressee will always write with the addressee in mind. His emotional appeal the night before left little positive impact on Elizabeth and external readers; he shifts, therefore, to a form that can sometimes allow for a purging of emotions but can also help restrict and conceal them. In “Of Grammatology,” Jacques Derrida states, “What writing itself…betrays is life. It menaces breath, spirit, and history… Cutting the breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual creation in the repetition of the letter…confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it(writing) is the principle of death” (25). For Derrida, an epistle or any external form of writing is always a false one, stifling the vivacity that occurs within the mind, in the world. However, for Darcy, this aspect of letters is a trump card, a way to deaden the emotions that were far too strong the day
before. Consequently and unsurprisingly, within the body of the letter, he writes, “You may possibly wonder why all this was not told to you last night. But I was not master enough of myself” (Austen 134). This implies that the letter has allowed him a way to kill, as Derrida describes it, emotions and gain control over the situation; the “narrow space” creates enough room for facts but not much else. The restrictions are clearly drawn boundaries that help Darcy navigate the “two offences of a very different nature, and by no means of equal magnitude…last night laid to [his] charge” (Austen 129). The letter is a rebuttal then; he is making a case for his innocence.

Moreover, after the extremely emotional and horrendously failed proposal of the night before, Darcy clearer expects, not arbitrarily, an extremely emotional response to his words; thus the style of his letter seeks to circumvent this. Furthermore, his opening paragraph also sets the tone for the rest of the letter, warning readers against certain reactions (those of the emotional sort) that will only cause pointless pain in circumstances that require a cool, rational mindset: “the effort which…the perusal of this letter must occasion, should have been spared, had not my character required it be written and read. You must, therefore, pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice” (Austen 129, emphasis mine). Again, the letter is creating a dichotomy between justice and emotions, seeking to push the latter to the wayside. As Diane Cousineau states, “The writer writes to produce an effect” (31). What is important in *Pride and Prejudice* and this particular epistle is what effects Mr. Darcy seeks to produce within Elizabeth and, consequently, what effects Jane Austen wishes to produce in her readers.
Taking this question further and how it impacts the form of this letter, he doesn’t open with a salutation and nowhere in the letter does he call Elizabeth by name. The pronoun “you” becomes both Elizabeth and the external reader, begging both to reevaluate Darcy, his actions, and the events that have already occurred in the text thus far. This makes it easier to understand Christopher Brooke’s statement in his *Jane Austen Illusion and Reality*, “The letter is a very powerful revelation of Darcy’s mind, and the fulcrum on which the story turns” (80). What makes it that powerful fulcrum is that here Elizabeth and external readers are being addressed together. They stand on those pages together and yet are utterly alone as the narrator steps back; the text gives the readers a chance to peruse the entirety of Darcy’s petition without any emotional interjections. More significantly, perhaps, the letter is also not broken by interjections from either the narrator or Elizabeth. Like a jury, external readers receive Darcy’s words uninterrupted; this creates a sharp contrast to the conversation from the night before, during which Elizabeth’s furious retorts and the narrator’s comments about her state of mind, repeatedly shattered Darcy’s discourse. His epistle can become a fulcrum because the external readers have been in the same emotional state as Elizabeth up until now, viewing nearly every event and occurrence through her eyes. Now, both must step back and read Darcy’s rational and arguably objective (at least attempt at objective in this epistle), not Elizabeth’s subjective, perception of the situations and characters that have appeared on the pages thus far. The power of that “you” then mirrors a courtroom where the counselors address the jury as a whole, not individually naming each. Here,
Elizabeth and readers stand together, pushed to weigh Darcy’s actions and his reasons for those actions with the mind and not the heart.

Yet, Brooke perhaps goes too far in stating that the letter reveals Darcy mind. More truthfully, the epistle reveals very little of his thought process at all. In fact, Mary A. Favret’s take on Mr. Darcy’s letter seems to show an understanding of how it and its style work in a very unique way within this Austen novel: “Darcy’s epistle, which disrupts both Elizabeth’s pride and her prejudice, is less a confession (it offers little insight into the ‘personality’ Elizabeth will learn to love) than a legal defense” (149-150). Both pride and prejudice, which Favret states Darcy’s words disrupt, are emotionally charged nouns used to describe not only Elizabeth’s reactions but her feelings. Perhaps the reason Darcy’s epistle is able to disrupt both is because it is, conversely, not emotionally charged. In “Epistolarity: Letter Book,” Janet Altman purposes that “a single letter…negotiates a relationship with a particular reader” (19). Her words have the surprising ring of a legal document. Indeed, Darcy’s letter, from beginning to end, is a negotiation; he seeks to not only explain his actions but also adjust his relationship with Elizabeth. Austen also negotiates with the external reader, for without this letter neither external readers nor Elizabeth are very likely to provide Darcy with a second chance. This may explain why the letter contains such lines as, “If, in the explanation which is due to myself, I am under the necessity of relating feelings which may be offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry” (Austen 130). Such lines reinforce the dichotomy between feelings and justice that opened the letter and negotiate to pull the reader away from reacting with sentiment. In this manner, the letter
reveals less of Darcy’s mind and more of where he and Jane Austen want their readers’ minds to be.

The particular elements included within the first few pages of the letter help to place both Elizabeth and the external readers in a very specific state of mind. Even with the concluding lines of the letter, Darcy is still intent upon petitioning for his innocence and pleading to the reader’s sense of justice: “If your abhorrence of me should make my assertions valueless, you cannot be prevented from the same cause from confiding in my cousin” (Austen 134). He has made his case, concluded his point, and is now returning to the bench to call his primary witness, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Whether Mr. Darcy’s letter is entirely successful in accomplishing a total void of emotions is beside the point. Instead, the focus needs to rest on how the words are making an attempt, a very manipulative one it would not be too difficult to state, to draw forth certain reactions while trying keep other ones at bay.

As opposed to Darcy, Jane Austen may be a bit more successful in this endeavor to emotionally distance readers because she presents the epistle as a whole, excluding Elizabeth’s reactions to its contents until the next chapter. Readers are left on their own to see the letter as Elizabeth is seeing it, without any other input, not even from the narrator. On those pages, they stand alone as Elizabeth sits alone. It is perhaps this reading of Darcy’s epistle and its function in *Pride and Prejudice* that has Garrett Stewart writing in *Dear Reader*, “This is what Austen...serves to demonstrate whenever her work is noticed to offer not only a wry conspectus on human nature but a virtual structuring of subjectivity in the protocols of reading” (91). Darcy’s epistle then is not
only revealing certain important pieces of information but is also guiding the readers on how the letter is supposed to be viewed. Unlike his failed proposal, he is oddly silent in this letter; his personality is suppressed while facts are brought to the surface. He becomes an almost narrator. In some ways, he has already acted and this is the passive recollection of his actions. The readers, instead, are the ones being called upon to act, to take his words and draw conclusions from them. In *Jane Austen and Narrative Authority*, Tara Ghoshal Wallace, states that, “Silences in *Pride and Prejudice* are never neutral” (46). While Wallace is referring to the silence between the characters, her quote can also apply to the relationship between the external readers and the narrator. The silence plays an imperative role in allowing the letter to work as a legal document, a petition. Permitting the readers to view the document in such a manner is imperative because it allows for a constant rereading, of discovering new meanings and messages within the lines. This rereading is precisely what Elizabeth does throughout the second half of the novel, returning to the letter in her mind even if she doesn’t unfold and hold it out before her. The occurrence of new events allow for different or even slightly altered readings. After Wickham elopes with Lydia, Darcy’s words abruptly become more poignant, more painful, and far more believable. Because the letter is uninterrupted, given to external readers as a whole, they can, like Elizabeth, reread the words without being hindered, too much, by past interpretations.

This then follows Anne Bower’s claim that “in fiction, the letter is the other person and so to reread the letter is to reread the person” (163). However, Darcy’s epistle doesn’t necessarily let readers reread the person; instead, it nudges readers to
reevaluate the person’s actions. P.J.M. Scott states, “Elizabeth...has to learn too that character is a thing of layers and also may develop (as is the case with Darcy). And she does learn it” (69). This letter then is not Mr. Darcy; it is simply the utmost surface layer, a sort of public persona created in the same way a counselor dresses in a certain way when he/she steps into a courtroom. The epistle contains, arguably, only one layer of Darcy’s character but that layer helps to eventually reveal the deeper core that is Mr. Darcy. Acting as a fulcrum, the letters creates a pivot point for readers to move between the first and second halves of the novel. Elizabeth’s lessons, per se, of not only reading a text properly but also a person then begin with this letter that is setup as a guide. Darcy’s words attempt to herd readers into a corner of sorts, not leaving a lot of room for them to formulate emotionally charged reactions, especially those that may contradict with his desire to establish his innocence. In an abrupt tone, he writes, “I can only say that I am sorry” (Austen 130) as he informs Elizabeth that the explanations included in his letter may cause her pain. Yet again, this reiterates that sense of pushing readers away from emotions.

Thinking of Mr. Darcy’s letter as a guide, as a straightforward list of facts that work as a teaching tool, Christopher Brooke’s words make more sense; he states, “Her(Elizabeth) feelings for Darcy have been altered by the slow revelation-starting with this letter” (177). The letter doesn’t work as a sudden revelation but must be read over and over, the layers gradually pulled back: “What Austen brings out is an ingrained generic reciprocation of consciousness and conscience, or in a word coming to know better” (Stewart 106). In this manner, both internal and external readers are
presented with a litany of facts that continually take on new meaning, add and subtract different layers, as the story progresses. The letter then becomes a manipulative tool for both Mr. Darcy and Austen to gradually reveal his personality and pieces of the narrative arc bit by bit.

Building on Mary A. Favret’s assertion that Darcy’s letter reveals very little of the personality Elizabeth comes to fall in love with, the narrative arc brings both Elizabeth and the external readers back to the epistle, to read and reread the letter. If the epistle had not been given to either Elizabeth or the external readers as a complete document, it would be a cause for embarrassment and shame. The external readers are then spared from blushingly proclaiming and voicing Elizabeth’s plea, “Oh! Do not repeat what I then said” (Austen 240). Instead, throughout the novel, the external readers are afforded the same sort of privilege as Elizabeth where they can return to letter over and over again, whether in their minds or with their hands turning the pages back. Externally, they can come to see Mr. Darcy as Elizabeth eventually does.

Perhaps the reason why the letter is so easy to return to is because it makes such an effort to shirk away from emotions, because it can be looked at and experienced in different ways. It becomes a foil to Elizabeth’s rejection of Darcy’s first proposal, which is set in a powerful emotional context that cannot be escaped. No matter how many times the proposal scene is viewed, Elizabeth always comes off as the more irrational of the two, jumping to conclusions, and treating Darcy with harsh words, such as those regarding Mr. Wickham, that must have surely caused him considerable pain. Mr. Darcy’s letter, however, seems to change throughout the novel, from a rebuttal, to a
warning, to a confession, and even a very cleverly disguised attempt to earn Elizabeth’s respect if not her hand in marriage. Marina Tsvetaeva said of books, “There are books so alive that you're always afraid that while you weren't reading, the book has gone and changed, has shifted like a river; while you went on living, it went on living too, and like a river moved on and moved away. No one has stepped twice into the same river. But did anyone ever step twice into the same book?” (“Marina Tsvetaeva”). The letter in the middle of *Pride and Prejudice* remains the same; yet, as the story progresses, Elizabeth and the external readers step continually into the same location but the river has changed without changing at all. Darcy’s letter and petition then becomes “the parable from which you (the readers) extrapolate reflexively the very reading in which it coaches you” (Stewart 107). The letter then becomes a guide not only for Elizabeth on how to read but also for the external readers.

Upon his second proposal, Darcy asks of his letter, “Did it…did it soon make you think better of me? Did you, on reading it, find any credit to its contents?” (Austen 240). To which, Austen and the narrator tell the external readers “what its effect on her (Elizabeth) had been, and how gradually her former prejudices had been removed” (Austen 240). The letter then was a success in that, eventually, it accomplished its goal: Darcy’s innocence was proven. The lack of emotions aided in its triumph, for throughout the book the narrator and Darcy both speak of how Elizabeth is a woman who works on emotions. This is best seen when she disagrees with her rational friend Charlotte Lucas; upon agreeing to marry Mr. Collins, Charlotte Lucas attempts to appease her horrified friend by saying, “I see what you are feeling...I am not romantic
you know. I never was” (Austen 85). Her words confirm Elizabeth as an emotional creature, a personality trait that remains constant throughout the novel. Yet, ironically, Darcy’s innately unromantic and unflattering letter is what slowly begins to win Elizabeth over. Its rational contents as well as its physical presence may not work on her heart as his actions later do but it works on her mind to gradually erase her former prejudices. Despite or, more appropriately, due to the manipulative nature of Darcy’s epistle and its form as a legal document, readers, internal and external, are able to slowly learn the many layers of Darcy’s personality and reevaluate his action as well as imperative characters and events in *Pride and Prejudice*. 
MOVING TO ACTION AND REMOVING GUILT:

HOW A LETTER SHAPES TWO RELATIONSHIPS

While Darcy’s letter works as the fulcrum of the novel, Lucy’s letter to Edward plays a different role in Sense and Sensibility. Her letter appears towards the end of the novel and reveals her marriage to Robert instead of to Edward. It comes as a glimmer of hope when all hope is lost. Lucy’s epistle provides the removal of an obstacle, pushing the reader and characters towards the conclusion. Garret Stewart writes, in Dear Reader, “You (the reader) are merely reading along coasting towards closure…with only so many ‘tell-tale’ pages left” (97). External readers, unlike Elinor, have the advantage of holding the novel in their hands and realizing that the narrative arc is racing towards a conclusion. Elinor and Edward’s fates must be decided within the next few pages. If anything is to bring the two together, it must happen and happen soon.

The element which is to save their relationship and future together appears in the form of Lucy’s short letter. In essence, it becomes both the reason for as well as the driving force which brings two couples together: Lucy with Robert and Elinor with Edward. Intriguingly, the letter seems deceptively simple and almost unnecessary at this point. Edward has already informed the family that he is free. Furthermore, the novel makes clear to both internal and external readers “to what purpose that freedom would be employed,” a purpose that can be “easily predetermined by all” (Austen 336). The narrator has a bit of laugh here at the readers; as soon as Edward is free, the assumption, within and without the novel, is that he and Elinor will marry.
Yet, a sinister edge lurks in this laughter; words have proven tricky, and Elinor-Marianne too- have already fallen once for Edward’s speeches, which didn’t quite reveal the truth. The novel thus contains Lucy’s letter as ocular proof of Edward’s freedom, as evidence that now words match truth. Christopher Brooke writes, “The end of Sense and Sensibility comes as a series of shocks: Lucy’s marriage, Edward’s freedom and proposal” (71). The letter then helps to keep these shocks out of the realm of the absurd. It mitigates the feeling that the novel is simply the construction of narrative authority; the power drifts from the writer outside the novel (the author) to the writer within (Lucy Steele). However, in Dear Reader, Garret Stewart warns readers to be wary of Austen: “You are merely reading…when the emotional turmoil that might beset you as participant is overruled by your status as mere readers…this is an important point for the history of reading’s reflexive action” (97). In effect, Stewart is claiming that the author holds all the cards while the reader has little control over the text, other than the knowledge that with such and such pages left, the narrative must be drawing to a conclusion. Yet, this conclusion should not seem forced, not seem to badger external readers with the idea that they are not “true” participants. Lucy’s letter allows for a break in that coasting; it provides a reason for the conclusion, allows readers to become participants as they read the letter alongside Elinor. Therefore, Lucy’s letter not only helps to cement the two relationships but also brings the sudden good luck, the shocks, into the realm of reality, of believability.

In “Epistololarity: Letter Reader,” Janet Altman suggests, “A single letter, when it is dispatched as a truly missive letter, projects an image of its author at a given point in
time and negotiates a relationship with a particular reader” (19). The negotiation part holds true for Mr. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth; Lucy is also negotiating a new relationship with the man who was once her fiancée. To a greater extent, however, her letter produces an image of her character, solidifies her personality in the minds of internal and external readers. Yet, the image projected of Mrs. Robert Ferrars is not a flattering one. P.J. M Scott mentions, “Mrs. Ferrars…is odious without a redeeming feature. Egotism is the beginning and end of [her] character” (95). Lucy’s letter only supports Scott’s claim. Even Edward Ferrars, a seemingly naïve character in the novel, senses this when he ashamedly tells Elinor, “[H]ow I have blushed over the pages of her writings” (Austen 340). With the very salutation, Lucy sets the tone for the letter as rude and abrupt, for she begins with an overly formal, “Dear Sir” (Austen 339). Yet, the rudeness serves a purpose and, gradually, the cleverness of this letter reveals itself. Lucy, in her odious manner, is placing all the blame upon Edward’s shoulders. In the essay “Re-sitting the Subject,” Gerald Maclean discusses how letters are powerful devices that can affect readers’ thoughts (189). Lucy certainly asserts her power through her letter. Her opening line reads, “Being very sure I have long lost your affections, I have thought myself at liberty to bestow my own on another” (Austen 339). From the start, she is in a position of power as she takes on the role of victim and thrusts Edward into the role of betrayer. She adds to this when she states, “It shall not be my fault if we are not always good friends” (Austen 340). With these words, she is again attempting to push the burden of maintaining a new relationship between the two off her shoulders onto Edward’s. Mary A. Favret, in Romantic Correspondence, states, “In self-defense,
the inner self runs from the reign of the letter. In the process, the letter becomes more solid, material, ‘real’” (154). As Lucy forces the pressure onto Edward, she removes it from around her heart. In her attempts to do this, however, she reveals the meanness of her character as well as her shrewdness. This can be seen in the themes if not the words she includes in her epistle. Her concluding words are subtly full of power as well: “You sincere well-wisher, friend, and sister” (Austen 340, emphasis mine). Here, Lucy is setting the standard for what their relationship in the future will be like. She takes the initiative since they are now related through marriage; they cannot avoid each other so a new relationship must be developed. This also provided external readers with a hint as to how they can, at least try, to interact with each other in the future in the midst of circumstances that can only be awkward at best.

Yet, the rudeness and abruptness of Lucy’s letter also plays a role in cementing her character, in making both the internal and external readers pleased that she is marrying Robert. In Austen: Reassessment, P.J. M. Scott berates Lucy, stating, “She wants to be sure of the money, not the man: (88). This analysis of Lucy’s character becomes even more apparent in her detailed listing of travels and new found prosperity. She is flaunting, even in this truncated letter, how happy she is with a life of money, a life that Edward couldn’t have provided as he was going against his mother’s wishes. In Romantic Correspondence, Mary A. Favret plays upon Edward’s statement to Elinor that “this is the only letter I ever received from her in which the substance made me any amends for the defect of the stile” (Austen 340): “Poetic justice weds vanity to vanity, and seals the match with letters” (150-151). The substance not only frees Edward but it
also affirms Lucy’s low demeanor and selfish sensibilities to both external and internal readers. In short, the novel provides characters and readers a satisfaction in seeing Lucy become Robert’s wife, a satisfaction that goes beyond the simple fact that Edward can now marry Elinor.

In Epistolarity Approaches to a Form, Janet Altman writes, “The letter is a prime instrument of revelation and discovery, so that the act of reading in epistolary fiction often corresponds to the classical moment of recognition…be it through a reading of one’s own letters or a close scrutiny of the letters of others” (92). While Lucy is perhaps not successful in hiding her true self from either internal characters or external readers, she does manage to manipulate the situation, at least in her mind, to her liking. This reworking of events is not only a rebuilding of her relationship with Edward but also a building of the new relationship with Robert. Because of her earlier comment to Elinor regarding Robert Ferrars, this marriage comes as a shock; although, it does affirm Scott’s statement that Lucy wants to be certain of her financial future rather than the man who will become her husband. To Elinor, upon being asked about Robert, Lucy declares, “I never saw him; but I fancy he is very unlike his brother-silly and a great coxcomb. A great coxcomb!” (Austen 142). Through the remainder of the novel, external and internal readers discover that Robert Ferrars is indeed not quite up to par with his brother. The novel’s agreement with Lucy’s original declaration makes her words, “Your brother has gained my affections entirely, and we could not live without one another” (Austen 340) all the more unsettling. Through her letter, Lucy attempts to not only rewrite her past with Edward but with Robert as well.
Christopher Brooke writes of novelists such as Austen that they “scatter their pages with clues, which they know or hope, their readers will not pick up at first reading” (99). Perhaps this mention of Robert as a great coxcomb was a hint to the readers, including Elinor, that Lucy, as foolish and mean as Robert, would eventually become his wife. Her letter works as an indicator then on how Lucy and Robert have been misread to this point and that, perhaps, readers have also not correctly read the other characters either. Janet Altman suggest in Epistolary Approaches to a Form “The careful epistolary reader is sensitive to messages of all kinds within the letter he decodes” (93). Yet, within the framework of Sense and Sensibility, Lucy’s letter proposes that perhaps both internal and external readers have not been as proficient in decoding letters as they might be in a second or third reading of the novel; they are, with Lucy’s letter, put in the same arena of misreading that Marianne has already suffered through. Lucy has been a despicable character throughout the novel but now she is also shown as a coward, a woman writing to her former fiancé after she has married another: “We are just returned from the altar” (Austen 340). She doesn’t bother to send Edward an epistle, a memo, or even a very brief scribble that she has transferred her affections to his brother. Not until the marriage has taken place, not until she is certain that Robert and his money are hers, does she release Edward from his promise to marry her.

Lucy twists events so that she can transfer her guilt to Edward as easily as she has transferred her affections to his brother. Her demeanor in doing so also drops Edward down in level of importance. Anne Bower writes that certain letters “remind us
that writing is part of other activities that must also be attended to…household chores, jobs, and…writing is hard work and can’t always be accomplished in one go” (166-167). This adds a new layer to Lucy’s letter as she seems to go out of her way to show Edward she’s doing him a grand favor by writing this letter to him. He becomes another object, a task to simply be completed on her way to Dawlish.

While Edward asserts that the substance makes up for the style, the physicality of the letter is as imperative to the narrative arc as its content. Diane Cousineau, in *Letters and Labyrinths*, writes, “Letters…its particularity is the concreteness of its material form-paper, envelope, stamp- and the degree to which its conventions (signature and salutations) reify such notions as coherent human identity and a clear sense of destination and destiny” (26). The letter, despite its style, works as a marriage certificate, providing characters and external readers with physical proof of the marriage. The readers are given clues as to how important physical letters are when Lucy adds in her post-script, “I have burnt all your letters” (Austen 340). Jacques Derrida, in the *envois* portion of the Post Card, refers to a man who, “burns letters and speaks of epistolary sorcery” (35). Within Lucy’s letter and her burning of Edward’s epistles, a sort of magic exists. Her letter attempts to replace the love letters that came before it. It destroys the physical reminders of one relationship in order to provide a physical base for two new ones. Mary A. Favret states, “Austen…does not stop testing and reevaluating the personal letter…it is there, playing a crucial, often decisive role” (137). The letter is included in the novel as a whole piece and is put into Elinor’s hand, despite Edward’s declaration of his freedom, for a reason. The letter has become the
catalyst, a character in a way; to extract it from the text takes away the very thing that played such a crucial and decisive role in the narrative. Its physical presence is imperative not only so that Elinor can have tangible evidence that Edward is no longer bound but also so that readers can be certain Lucy will not crop up again to hinder the impending marriage.

As Lucy completes her duty, albeit in a rather insensible, flippant way, the letter also seems to subtly push readers to re-evaluate Edward’s role in the development of these two relationships. The crucial, decisive function of this letter works not only to reveal Lucy’s character but to also, almost imperceptibly, criticize Edward for his weakness. While internal and external readers may very well be overjoyed with the impending marriage between Edward and Elinor, the novel utilizes the letter as a warning to both Elinor and other readers that this union is not perhaps the happy joining that it appears at its surface. Lucy’s letter, not Elinor’s love, moved Edward to finally arrive at the Dashwoods’ home and ask for Elinor’s hand in marriage. Jacques Derrida, in the *Post Card*, ponders the lifelike characteristics of a letter and wonders if a day will come when people will be sending sperm by post (24). The idea, at first, seems absurd; yet, in a way, readers see it played out in *Sense and Sensibility*. Lucy sends with her letter something intangible and yet very lifelike, a driving force that propels Edward out of his inactive state.

The letter not only illustrates Lucy’s cowardice but Edward’s as well. The novel provides both Elinor and external readers an unhindered view of Lucy’s note so that they may draw their own conclusions, so they may have one last chance to realize that
perhaps Edward is not the best match for Elinor; he is simply the most convenient man for a woman in her position. Elinor doesn’t seem to quite pick up on this. She doesn’t spare a moment to analyze Edward’s actions before the arrival of the letter and then his reaction to it. Instead, she focuses on the effects of Lucy’s marriage. After a brief moment, both Edward and Elinor turn to discussing the impact on the elder Mrs. Ferrars. Neither seems keen to discuss their roles in this secret marriage between Lucy and Robert. They have read the letter but are missing cues in it that reveal key characteristics of their personalities. Tara Ghoshal Wallace also notes the problem with Lucy’s letter finally provoking Edward to Elinor’s side: “If we expend the energy and acuity in analyzing Elinor’s self-deluding justifications, we are the more likely to be diverted from remembering that Edward has in fact contracted an engagement which he is too weak to fulfill or to repudiate, and that he has, while thus encumbered, raised expectations in another woman” (34). The question that has subtly been threaded throughout the novel comes to a head with the appearance of Lucy’s letter: is Edward truly the worthy gentleman that Elinor keeps painting him as? The answer that lies within Lucy’s written words seems to dictate that, truthfully, no, Edward is not quite the catch he appears to be.

If Edward was an honorable gentleman, he would have told Elinor upon their first meeting that he was engaged. He does attempt it but with no real conviction, a shameful act since the novel later reveals that he was at that moment wearing the ring with a lock of his then fiancée’s hair. External readers are reminded that he did not even have the decency to hide this. Lucy, after revealing her secret engagement, asks Elinor,
“Perhaps you might notice the ring when you saw him?” (Austen 129). To this query, Elinor is forced to admit, “‘I did;’…with a composure of voice, under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before” (Austen 129). This great pain could have been easily avoided with a few simple words from Edward on the matter. If, however, his lips were sealed because the engagement was to be kept a secret from all, he could have, at the very least, not raised hopes within Elinor’s heart, could have concealed the ring or not worn it in front of her. Though broken-hearted upon learning of the secret engagement, Elinor too sees Edward’s fault in this affair: “He had been blamable, highly blamable in remaining at Norland after he first felt her influence over him to be more than it ought to be. In that, he could not be defended,” (Austen 134). Yet, Elinor does defend him; she finds reasons to forgive him and pity his case more than her own. When he arrives at her home later in the novel, she disappointingly believes his words before seeing Lucy’s letter and, after reading it, turns all her attention to Lucy and Robert. Tara G. Wallace states of Elinor, “In Elinor Dashwood, Austen…inscribed a set of doubtful motivations and strategies that undermine her right to authority” (43). Her delusions and Edward’s weakness show the external readers that there is a sort of mirroring between Lucy wedding Robert and Elinor wedding Edward; both matches consist of people that seem utterly devoted to forgiving the character faults in their partners. Though in a different manner, Lucy’s missive, much like Darcy’s in *Pride and Prejudice*, allows for a re-reading of events that have already occurred; it begs for a re-evaluation of Edward and of Elinor’s personalities.
The simple and clear understanding of Lucy’s letter is that it brings to light that which has been hidden up to this point, that which shows she is now married and Edward is free of restrictions. Linda Kauffman’s words, “Implicit in every discourse of desire…is the same impulse to make the hidden visible” (295) corroborate this idea. However, certain issues appear with so simple a reading. Lucy’s hidden marriage is made visible but character traits are also revealed, the most problematic of which is Edward’s. His comment on her epistle, “this is the only letter…of which the substance made…amends for the defect of the stile” (Austen 340) again prods the readers to reconsider championing him as Elinor’s lifetime companion. This is the first letter whose substance has met with his approval, thus indicating that he had, at the very least, an inkling of Lucy’s low character. Furthermore, he tells Elinor only after he has been released from the engagement that entering into it was not a very wise decision to begin with: “It was foolish, idle inclination of my side…the consequence of ignorance of the world-and want of employment” (Austen 337). Like Lucy, he also immediately shoves the blame off on another, stating that his mother is to be held at fault and that if she had provided him with a profession “it would never have happened” (Austen 337). The novel draws unflattering parallels between Lucy and Edward that become significantly apparent when Lucy’s letter appears just a page or two after Edward’s declaration of his innocence in the previous affair. Elinor seems to resolutely ignore this subtle mirroring as well as Edward’s weakness. She acts in such a manner despite now having heard several reasons why Edward should have broken off the engagement; his weakness, in the guise of honor, kept him attached to Lucy, even when he knew she was not the best
of women. These reasons include one that Elinor repeats after reading Lucy’s letter: “Your mother…has actually been bribing one son…to do the very deed which he has disinherited the other for intending to do” (Austen 340). The novel provides neither the Dashwoods nor external readers a single reason, other than supposed honor, for Edward to continue his engagement with Lucy. If Edward had been honorable, however, he would not have misled Elinor. Moreover, as no one else knew of the engagement, Edward’s dissolving of it may have caused Lucy some pain but would not have humiliated or dishonored her in society. Lucy, therefore, is the active character, her letter actually possessing more life and force than Edward and his meek travel to the Dashwoods after Lucy gives him the free reign to do so.

The letter then becomes a multi-faceted character within Sense and Sensibility despite its meager length and its appearance at the end of the novel. Mary A Favret claims, “In Sense and Sensibility… the letter’s effectiveness as a story-telling vehicle is exposed as impotent and unnatural” (146). While this claim may be true for the other letters in this particular novel, it doesn’t quite hold true for Lucy’s note. Even though her words do not quite tell a story, they do help push the narrative to its final conclusion. Furthermore, her letter removes the last hurdle and finally sets Edward, a fairly passive and inactive character in the novel, into motion. While it provides a path for these two couple to arrive at the altar, it also reveals the faults in their characters and subtly asks readers to question whether these marriages are actually providing happy endings or if all four spouses are merely settling.
MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD:

EFFORTS TO RESHAPE IDENTITY THROUGH LETTERS

While Lucy’s short letter in *Sense and Sensibility* seeks to affirm character traits that have been subtly and not so subtly hinted at throughout the novel, Frank Churchill’s lengthy letter in *Emma* attempts to rewrite his character and identity. The novel continually informs both Emma and external readers that his letter of explanation will arrive soon. It is needed to decode why Frank Churchill has treated Emma so poorly and has acted rather oddly in many other circumstances, like the picnic where Emma humiliates Miss Bates. Anne Bower’s argument that reading a letter allows for a reformation of the writer’s image (163) applies to Frank Churchill as much as it did to Lucy and Mr. Darcy. At the point in the novel when his letter arrives, his character has already managed to gather a number of stains, first through his toying with Emma, despite her indifference, then with the revelation of his secret engagement. Emma states to Mrs. Weston after learning of Frank and Jane’s secret engagement, “I have really for some time past, for at least these three months, cared nothing about him…But this does not acquit him” (Austen 372). External readers are viewing Frank through Emma and the rest of the community’s eyes. He is in disgrace. His letter then is not so much an attempt at an acquittal but a chance to ask others to reread him as well as his actions. His epistle is an intriguing revelation of character because it comes neither through Emma’s eye nor the narrator’s words; instead, Austen allows him his voice and gives him the only letter of the novel: “Only one letter, at the very end of the novel, is open
for direct perusal” (Favret 155). The direct perusal is imperative, perhaps not to the narrative but to Frank Churchill as he attempts to reshape his identity in Highbury.

Frank Churchill’s letter, at first, appears at odds with Anne Bower’s claim that “the letter becomes a literary ‘tool’ for deconstructing the house of dominant discourse, opening up that house to voices previously excluded voices” (165). Has Frank Churchill really been excluded from the dominant discourse of Highbury? In fact, he has been. His voice is absent from the novel up to this point in that external readers have evaluated him and his actions mostly through Emma’s eyes, a woman who has misread people throughout the novel. Sending a letter allows him a form of control over his words as Mary A. Favret writes, “Emma senses the epistolary form ‘surrenders control’…to the letter-writer” (164); Frank’s control would have been otherwise lost in speech, as it has been thus far. Additionally, Diane Cousineau discusses how such a form of discourse is often one-sided: “The letter also reveals the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of the reciprocity of such communication” (26). Frank’s epistle becomes not only the first chance he has of making his voice heard in *Emma* but also of possibly avoiding censure in return. However, his words are mediated through Mrs. Weston: “A note from Mrs. Weston to herself(Emma), ushered in the letter from Frank” (Austen 408). This actually works to his advantage and particular aspects of the letter show he may have contrived this mediation. His salutation is not directed at Mrs. Weston, instead it reads, “My dear Madam” (Austen 408); through a parenthetical note, the narrator informs readers that the letter is written to Mrs. Weston.
Frank’s reason for sending the letter to his mother-in-law can be a very simple one: money. Mary A. Favret mentions, “The cost of a note was determined by the number of sheets it covered, and with postal charges rising dramatically, correspondents set a high value on the ability to pack loads of information onto a single page and to write neatly, with a small hand… most letters were paid for at their destinations” (136). At this point of the novel, characters other than Mrs. Weston would be unlikely to pay for Frank’s extensive letter. This also shows Frank’s selfishness; he is taking advantage of her affection for him in order to make her pay for a lengthy explanation that, had he been more courageous, could have been spoken to the people of Highbury. Yet, this explanation is far too simple.

Frank’s delivery of the letter to Mrs. Weston indicates his knowledge that the letter will not remain in a private sphere. His explanations of his engagement with Jane, his treatment of Emma, and his removal from Highbury all indicate an understanding that these are questions that need to be answered not only for Mrs. Weston’s sake but the other inhabitants of Highbury as well. As Christopher Brooke writes, “It is a catastrophe of the kind loved by Jane Austen” (107). The reason it is catastrophic is because Frank’s letter must be addressed to a great number of people. Moreover, his words must find a balance between revealing too little and revealing too much. The addressee may be written out as singular but the writer seems as aware as readers that it is actually plural. Janet Altman states, in regards to letters, that “a reader is nonetheless a determinant of the letter’s message…at the very inception of the letter, he plays an instrumental generative role…the letter is by definition…the result of a union of writer
and reader” (88). In asking for pardon, Frank does not direct his apology solely at Mrs. Weston but also at “those among [her] friends who have had any ground for offence” (Austen 409). His letter seems to be written with the knowledge that Mrs. Weston will not be its only reader. His omissions from the epistle corroborate this idea, for he has little reason to hide information from his mother-in-law. She seems to champion him, despite his actions, even before she reads his letter. He provides no explanation for his omissions either: “My right to place myself in a situation requiring such concealment, is another question. I shall not discuss it here” (Austen 409). The letter shows an awareness of how quickly the private can become public and is an attempt to formulate some sort of control over this crossing of boundaries.

In fact, the narrative has shown readers and characters that gossip travels exceptionally fast in Highbury. Mary A. Favret notes, “Emma’s letters…force the individual to enter into circulation” (156). Utilizing Mrs. Weston as a buffer, Frank’s letter enters into circulation indirectly, for it follows her inscribed introduction. Janet Altman, in Epistolary Approaches to a Form, writes, “In fact, the entire novel moves between these two poles of secrecy and publication, between the need for privacy and the need for publicity” (108). Frank’s letter has the appearance of a private epistle while it harbors a need for publicity. His reputation has been tarnished publically and so it must be refigured publically as well. Diane Cousineau writes, “As the locus where public and private identities merge, the post office leads us to the discomforting realization that once inquiry into intimate concerns become matter for public display, the emotions offer themselves up to judgment and correction” (32). Using Mrs. Weston
as a mediator provides him with an advocate who is a well-respected figure within the Highbury community. Without her, little chance exists for his voice to be heard and certainly not in the way he desires.

Mrs. Weston is the one who takes the letter out of the private sphere and thrusts it into the public. She not only hands it to Emma but also writes, “I know what thorough justice you will do to it, and have scarcely a doubt of its happy effect” (Austen 408). Mrs. Weston is not only subtly appealing to the readers’ sense of fairness but also indicating the affect that the letter should have. Garret Stewart writes that “wordplay is always playing upon the reader” (96). Through their wordplay, both Mrs. Weston and Frank are utilizing their identities to manipulate the reader’s into having certain reactions. Gerald Maclean argues that “The primary claim to ownership signified by letter writing was a claim over one’s own identity, a claim predicated on a body inscribed by the subject’s design” (182). Frank’s epistle is clearly an effort to reclaim his identity, which can be seen through his comments such as, “My behavior to Miss Woodhouse indicated, I believe, more than it ought…Had I not been convinced of her indifference, I would not have been induced by any selfish views to go on” (Austen 410). Here, he, much like Lucy in her letter to Edward, pushes the blame onto the very person that should be seen as the victim. He places himself in a new role as simply a shrewd man that took advantage of an opportunity provided to him; he never quite apologizes for his behavior. Mrs. Weston’s preface, in fact, is what frames Frank’s explanatory letter as something more than the arrogant piece of writing that it is: “This letter has been the cure of all the little nervousness I have been feeling lately” (Austen
408). Her preface is what allows his letter to be tolerable for external and internal readers; it allows him to make a claim over his own identity.

Frank’s signature at the end of the letter is as formal as his salutation since he signs it, “F.C. Weston Churchill” (Austen 414). The stiff formal signature seems to indicate, once again, his awareness that his epistle will be read by people other than his mother-in-law. Since Mrs. Weston appears to be the only addressee, this seems an odd way to end his epistle, unless he knows others will read it. Furthermore, if someone else does read it, they will be under no misconceptions of exactly who wrote this particular letter. His signature is yet another hint to internal and external readers that he is aware his epistle will enter into the public sphere. Janet Altman warns, “As a tangible document, even when intended for a single addressee, the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers. It passes freely from the private to the public domain and even back again” (109). Frank is absent from Highbury and thus relinquishes his control to Mrs. Weston to mediate this passing from the private to the public. Yet, his formal signature establishes his presence and avoids confusion. In his preface to The Post Card, Derrida writes, “signers are not inevitably to be confused with senders” (5). This seemingly convoluted statement becomes somewhat clearer when read alongside Diane Cousineau’s understanding of signatures:

“The signature, guarantor of self-presence and self-knowledge, attests to the existence of a responsible an unified self that assures the truth of the letter’s body. Its inscription at the end of the letter thus sustains the belief that the identity of the signifier and the signified are one and that
words are to be safely identified. In fact, the evocative power of the signature to conjure presence at the very moment of absence is the foremost feature, indeed the very magic and seduction of the epistolary situation” (27).

Readers’ receive two signatures when Frank’s letter appears in the text. Like Emma, they first see Mrs. Weston’s signature at the end of her short introduction to Frank’s letter then his own at the end. These signatures add weight to his words, much in the same way Mr. Darcy’s use of Colonel Fitzwilliam added weight to his declarations. The presence of the signatures and the differences between the signers are of great import within the text. Garret Stewart writes, “Austen is concerned with the structuring of identity upon a grid of indifference” (105). While this occurs throughout the novel, especially as Emma is shown alongside Harriet or Mr. Knightley, here it is collapsed into a few pages, between two signatures and two people: Frank Churchill and Mrs. Weston.

Through Emma, Austen “gives us a cautionary tale about authorial intervention and self-perpetuating power, power that slips beyond the control of the author itself” (Wallace 88). While the content and delivery of Frank’s epistle shows that he makes an effort to exert some sort of control over its effects, the letter’s power eventually slips beyond his control, first through Mrs. Weston’s reading of it, then Emma’s and finally Knightley’s. While Tara Ghoshal Wallace’s argument refers to Austen’s words, her analysis can also be applied to Frank’s words; the word author needs only to be replaced with the word writer. The power falls into the hands of the readers and how they choose to interpret his and Mrs. Weston’s words. As Mary A. Favret claims,
“Austen gives us a reading lesson…reactivates the role of letters in fiction…has us read through this letter twice, watching the responses of both Emma and Knightley” (155).

The dual, triple if one counts Mrs. Weston, reading of this letter serves to show external readers how quickly the power of a text can slip out of the writer’s hands. Readers are left free to draw their conclusions about Frank Churchill. Jacques Derrida also seems to understand the problem of how much influence the reader can wield over a text; he adds to a letter in *The Post Card*, “When I write you (,) you continue, you transfigure everything…the transformation comes from behind the words, it operates in silence simultaneously subtle and incalculable, you substitute yourself for me right up to my tongue, you ‘send’ it to yourself” (183). The writer can choose which words he/she includes in his/her letter but readers have the finally say on what image of the writer these words conjure. This becomes apparent when Mrs. Weston creates an image of Frank as a man absolved of all his former sins, Emma of a man that can be forgiven because he as deeply in love as she is now, and Knightley of a pompous, foolish man who does not deserve the pardon he seeks.

Furthermore, the lapse in time between when the letter was written to when the letter arrived allows Emma to be far more lenient. She gives a more favorable reading of Frank’s attempt at reshaping his identity than she might perhaps have if the letter had arrived before she learned Knightley loved her: “He was so grateful to Mrs. Weston, and so much in love with Jane Fairfax, and *she was so happy herself*; that there was no being severe; and could he have entered the room, she must have shaken hands with him as heartily as ever” (Austen 415, italics mine). Jacques Derrida’s somewhat
anachronistic declaration, “Between writing with a pen and speaking on a phone, what a difference” (31), is fitting. It also provides another explanation for why a letter was written at all and why Frank didn’t simply come to Highbury, where he could explain matters face-to-face. Anne Bower suggests, “A letter text embodies…here and there, now and then, absence and presence” (157). This absence of readers, meaning the addressees are not standing before him demanding an explanation, allows Frank to interject his letter with emotionally charged statements such as, “Here, my dear madam, I was obliged to leave off abruptly, to recollect and compose myself. I have been walking over the country, and am now, I hope, rational enough to make the rest of my letter what it ought to be” (Austen 411). He may have been sitting at his desk with a quill in hand the entire time. Yet, he uses the absence of those he addresses to his advantage; he manipulates words to nudge the reader into forming a particular image of him as a man overcome with emotion. Furthermore, the very writing of a letter means that it must be sent off, delivered by post, and as such, time becomes as great a factor as does the absence of the addressee.

Time, like Mrs. Weston, works as Frank’s advocate. However, Austen warns external readers throughout the novel that Emma’s readings are often incorrect. Tara Ghoshal Wallace condemns Emma when she writes that “Knightley is the correct reader while Emma is like, in Laura G. Mooneyham’s words, a ‘ghost-writer’” (87). Yet, Knightley also becomes a victim of time. Upon reading the letter, he confesses to Emma, “Had I been offered the sight of one of this gentleman’s letters to his mother-in-law a few months ago, Emma, it would not have been taken with such indifference”
(Austen 416). The point, however, is that the letter is taken with indifference and not with quite as thorough a reading as might be accepted from Knightley. Again, the novel seems to warn us not to accept any reading too quickly, even when the reader is generally correct in other circumstances; Tara G. Wallace postulates, “Emma sometimes privileges narrative authority, asking readers to trust what they are told, and sometimes urges to resist, to read against the grain, to challenge any voice that claims to be authoritative” (78). Time and distance allow even a correct/authoritative reader to perhaps be not quite as harsh as on Frank as his letter calls for. Conversely, P.J.M Scott’s analysis of Frank’s character is on point: “After all the pain he has caused, Frank still gladly enjoys making the less savoury aspects…a matter for teasing” (68). While Frank clearly seems to be making an attempt to reconstruct his identity, he is not quite successful because of the arrogance that seeps into his tone: “My courage rises while I write. It is very difficult for the prosperous to be humble” (Austen 408). His pompous, self-centered nature hasn’t changed one bit since he left Highbury. The difference is only that readers are given some explanation for his rude behavior.

Yet, again, readers should note that time plays a major role in the letter’s success. His selfish demeanor is forgiven perhaps because so much else has occurred in Highbury since his departure. Diane Cousineau writes that “the very time lapse that is built into epistolary exchange underlines the fact that she or he who writes is not necessarily the same as she or he whose words are read”(32). The reception of Frank’s letter in Emma hints that Cousineau’s interpretation should be taken one step further: the intended and even unintended recipients imagined by the writer are also not
necessarily the same as those who eventually read the letter. This is not to say that the epistle is intended for Mrs. Weston and is accidentally or mistakenly read by Emma and Knightley. Instead, it suggests that the importance of Frank and his identity has lessened in Highbury minds. Emma and Knightley, for instance, are now a couple and have little interest in Frank’s words. Knightley simply reads the letter because, as he says to Emma, “It seems a matter of justice” (Austen 415). Additionally, Emma claims, before ever opening the letter, that “she was now in perfect charity with Frank Churchill, she wanted no explanations” (Austen 408). The necessity that invoked the letter is no longer quite present in the text. Time has taken on most of Frank’s burden of recreating his identity for him even before his epistle is read.

Frank asks, in his letter, “Are you disposed to pity me for what I must have suffered?” (Austen 413). Mrs. Weston may answer affirmatively and Emma, having recently suffered through the fear of losing Mr. Knightley, may agree with her. Yet, Frank seems to be wholly unsuccessful in accomplishing the feat of reshaping his identity. Instead, the narrative has reached a point where he doesn’t quite matter anymore. Why then is the letter given to readers, especially external ones, as a whole piece? An answer can be found in Garret Stewart’s interpretation of Austen and her writing: “In Austen-and the tradition she advances-the analogic tables are turned. Rather than life suddenly getting refigured in the novel, novel reading builds to a climax as a distended and unidentified figure for life under the sign of a signifying duration: the perceptive taking of one’s time on the way to ‘the end’” (97). This letter not only slows the narrative down a bit as everything seems to be falling magically into place but it
also reminds external and internal readers that misreading must be corrected. Frank is not quite successful in his effort to reshape his identity but his epistle, undeniably, allows for his voice to be heard in a novel where Emma dominates.
CONDEMNING WITHOUT RISK:

USING THE LETTER AS A PAPER RISK

Most of the letters that appear within Austen’s novels tend to have a similar theme. In particular, the three epistles discussed previously all make some sort of revelation, about the writer, the reader, and even the narrative at times. Furthermore, the revelations connected with these three are presented in the novels in a reasonably positive light. They provide the internal and external readers with important, sometimes imperative, information: the reason for Darcy’s and Frank’s rudeness as well as Lucy’s marriage to Robert. However, even Darcy, who includes very personal details and history in his letter to Elizabeth, seems oddly unconcerned with its sensitive nature. The very fact that he has put his sister’s failed elopement in writing shows how deeply he trusts Elizabeth to keep her new knowledge private.

Much like Austen’s novels, Wilde’s writings also contain letters that deal with revelations. However, they work in a much different way; a fear exists of what and to whom a letter may reveal sensitive information. Wilde’s writings often depict epistles as weapons, which, if they hit their mark, may be as destructive to the writer as to the reader(s). Janet Altman, in Epistolary Approaches to a Form, writes that “the moment of reading as a moment of… discovery the tendency of epistolary decoders to power over specific words and shape new letters [around quotations from old ones]- the presence of dominating readers” (99) are all important aspects of epistles. In the majority of Austen’s letters, these aspects are an advantage; they are the helpful parts of written communication. Even Jane’s letter, though it is lost, brings bad news, and stops
Darcy’s imminent second try at a proposal and Elizabeth’s acceptance, is a positive missive because it uncovers an unfortunate event that may have otherwise remained hidden. Because it is brought to light, it can be managed, can be fixed, and is, in fact, one of the main reasons Elizabeth eventually agrees to become Darcy’s wife. In Oscar Wilde’s writings, however, such revelations are to be avoided as much as possible; they can ruin reputations and destroy lives. This anxiety connected with letters can be seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, especially with Lord Henry’s note, including the newspaper and book, to Dorian Gray after the death of Sybil Vane. The memo and its accruements allow Lord Henry to say a great deal without saying anything at all, much like Dorian’s portrait, without risk to either himself or Dorian.

Upon Sybil’s death, the matter of the letter comes up abruptly, with Lord Henry asking Dorian almost desperately whether or not he has read his epistle. Dorian replies with an air of contempt, “I have not read it yet, Harry. I was afraid there might be something in it that I wouldn’t like. You cut life to pieces with your epigrams” (Wilde 78). This seems to indicate that, apart from his inability to write without including axioms, Lord Henry has a tendency to touch upon subjects in a manner that is uncomfortable to Dorian. This displays a failure on Lord Henry’s part since a writer needs to bear in mind his/her reader when writing. However, he appears to not want to make this mistake a second time. When Lord Henry sends another note to Dorian, he makes an effort to keep the letter as brief and simple as possible. Upon reading it, even Dorian states about Lord Henry’s note that “[i]t was simply to say that he sent him round the evening paper, and a book that might interest him, and that he would be at the
club at eight-fifteen” (Wilde 95, emphasis mine). The note is surprisingly straight-forward, short, and, above all, appears rather routine. As such, Lord Henry has finally succeeded in constructing a letter that Dorian does not find wearing to read; perhaps this may be because it includes no epigrams and, in fact, very little content. It is as terrifying or revealing as one’s grocery list may be. Perhaps this simplicity is to persuade Dorian to actually read the texts he has been sent. Yet, at the same time, the note also allows Lord Henry to catch Dorian off guard in the same way the narrative catches external readers.

Yet, Lord Henry’s purpose cannot only be to ensure that Dorian does not discard this letter without reading it. He could have just as easily walked over and handed Dorian these things or simply mentioned them to him the next time they met. So, why does he include the note and why is it so blatantly mundane? Gerald Maclean’s idea in “Re-sitting the Subject” offers an answer: “Letters invariably entail…the position of a third person, singular or plural” (177). In Austen, Frank and Lucy’s letter both seem to show the writer’s understanding that their letters will move into a public sphere; there will assuredly be the position of a third person. However, their attempts at addressing this are quite subtle: choosing words carefully or having the letter passed through a friendly relative. Lord Henry’s missive, however, reveals a clear desire to not only shut out the third person but to create a distance from the written words that he is sending Dorian. Jacques Lacan mentions in his lectures, The Purloined Poe, “[I]t becomes clear that the addressee’s proprietorship of the letter may be no less debatable than that of anyone else into whose hands it comes” (42). Lord Henry’s note hints at his
determination to avoid the issues of proprietorship. Any other reader of the letter would not know which book or which newspaper Lord Henry had sent along with his note. This move is simple to read: it allows Lord Henry to remain quite in the clear. His note does not reveal any clear accusations, which the newspaper article only subtly does. Furthermore, it also doesn’t unmask the idea that Lord Henry may actually be interested in Dorian and his extravagance, which the book he sends hints at. Like Lord Henry, Dorian also seems to comprehend how dangerous written words can be, for he thinks of Victor and worries that the worst of him may be revealed: “He had heard of rich men who had been blackmailed all their lives by some servant who had read a letter, or overheard a conversation, or picked up a card with an address, or found beneath a pillow a withered flower or a shred of crumple lace” (95). In this light, a few bits of paper laid clearly on a tea tray allow both external and internal readers to see how sensitive the situation is. Lord Henry’s note may not reveal much information but this very lack of details shows that perhaps he had the same fear of his letter being read as Dorian and as Jacques Derrida mentions in an envois letter of *The Post Card*: “Do you think there are listening devices? That our letters are opened?” (16). The narrative seems to be telling readers that Lord Henry, Wilde, and Dorian’s response to these questions would be in the affirmative.

Lord Henry then has not only kept his note short and simple for Dorian’s benefit but for his own as well. His brief words are a form of protection against intruding eyes. Dorian Gray, however, doesn’t seem to think that Lord Henry has succeeded in accomplishing this, for “[h]e felt a little annoyed with Lord Henry for having sent the
report. And it was certainly stupid of him to have marked it with the red pencil. Victor may have read it” (Wilde 96). Yet, this fear occurs, perhaps, only because Dorian has received these materials together, as a whole, a complete letter. Yet, Victor may never have guessed that these three pieces of writing had any links between them. The narrative states that, when Dorian walked into the room, he saw that “[a] copy of the third edition of *The St. James’s Gazette* had been placed on a tea tray” (Wilde 95). The very normalcy of this, a man reading a paper with his tea, mirrors Lord Henry’s simple note. Furthermore, Lord Henry, despite circling the passage on Sybil Vane, does not send a newspaper clipping but the entire edition. In fact, were the newspaper and the note separated, no particular link exists between the two, for he neither names the paper nor the book that he is sending over. Intriguingly, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also never reveals the title of the text. Even external readers are forced to guess at the title, particularly if they are/were unaware of Wilde’s court case during which he stated that he had been thinking of *À Rebours*. This lack of information opens up possibilities. The book external readers imagine it to be may say something about their own personalities; this mirrors the way in which Dorian’s interpretation of the pieces sent to him, particularly the newspaper, say something about him and his guilty conscience. The ambiguity is important. The pieces Lord Henry mentions could be any paper, any book, which means he has done what Derrida suggests in *The Post Card* and made his note a sort of secret.

In fact, external readers are led to believe that Lord Henry is so successful in achieving a completely benign note that neither they nor Dorian are fully aware of what
the newspaper may include. This sense is heightened since the note is sent several chapters after Dorian and Lord Henry discuss Sybil’s death. Dorian doesn’t seem to suspect its contents: “He opened *The St. James’s* languidly, and looked through it” (Wilde 95). The red-pencil marks, perhaps consciously chosen to resemble blood, are what make him stop and what draw his attention to the particular passage Henry desires him to read. Yet, the external readers would be shrewd to note that it is not the title of the article, “Inquest on an Actress” (Wilde 95), that catches Dorian’s eye but the red that pinpoints it. The narrative here creates a mirror situation, where the blemishes on the otherwise pristine newspaper match the blemishes on Dorian’s portrait. Lord Henry’s choice to markup the paper supports Mary A. Favret’s suggestion in *Romantic Correspondence*: “The letter-writer revealed as much in the appearance as in the content of a missive—and perhaps more” (135). That is certainly the case here because it is the appearance, not the content per se, that initially captures both Dorian’s eye and interest.

Moreover, Lord Henry has used another tactic to make sure his letter gets read, for the book and the newspaper are a part of his letter. In the lectures *How to do Things with Words*, J.L Austin amusingly states, “When the saint baptized the penguins, was this void because the procedure of baptizing is inappropriate to be applied to penguins, or because there is no accepted procedure of baptizing anything except humans?” (24). While the comedy is clear, an underlying piece of important information is also included here, especially when applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though not common practice or what many readers may consider a letter, the novel and the newspaper are as much a part of Lord Henry’s epistle as his short note. They are
assisting him in stating his message; though written by others, they too are his words. Like the baptized penguins, they are not part of the norm; this is precisely what gives them greater power, allowing Lord Henry to hide behind the idea that most people wouldn’t consider the newspaper or the novel as extensions of his letter.

Yet, what exactly is Lord Henry attempting to say? In *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, Janet Altman’s statement, “The careful epistolary reader is sensitive to messages of all kinds within the letter he decodes” (95), adds a new layer to Lord Henry’s note and the pieces connected with it. Yet, the question remains: what exactly is the message that Lord Henry is trying to bring to Dorian or the text to external readers? The latter is perhaps easier to answer as the connection between the stained newspaper and the stained picture seems too great to be a mere coincidence. Anything that Dorian comes into contact with becomes tarnished, ruined. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons that Lord Henry desires to create distance between him and Dorian and why he doesn’t clearly state what he wishes to convey through his note. He is, plausibly, afraid of being marked with the connection to Dorian. He is also attempting to save his reputation; he hides behind his unexciting simple letter the way Dorian hides behind his portrait. The picture allows Dorian to behave immorally without consequences while Lord Henry’s note allows him to condemn Dorian as Sybil’s murderer without directly saying so. He is, in essence, leaving the condemning up to Dorian, the way a lawyer may present evidence then allow the jury to make its own decision. In a short piece, “Not a Love Story,” Linda Kauffman writes, “The text also dissolves the hierarchies of active writer and passive reader…the text is thus an active
exertion” (295). Dorian Gray as well as external readers cannot sit back in their comfortable role as passive readers. The note forces them to play an active role, to search for its hidden messages and to decipher its contents.

Moreover, since Lord Henry is not accusing Dorian outright, the note allows him to retain his relationship with the extravagant, corrupt young man. Furthermore and more importantly, it also saves him from having to explain to anyone who may come across the letter why a man who knows another man is a murderer continues to be acquainted with him. This self-preservation harkens back to Derrida’s distrust of the post office as well as unintended recipients: the post office is “…a neutral machinery that supposedly leads the message to its destination, or at least that it would have its support make its way, for …a kind of open letter (like all letters), one can always…attempt to make it indecipherable without compromising its making its way. Indecipherable…even for the addressee” (35). Lord Henry must place his name upon the letter and Dorian’s, one might assume, to make certain that Dorian receives the letter at all. Like Derrida, Diane Cousineau also seems to comprehend the many pitfalls that await a letter as it travels from writer to reader when she writes, “To the image of the sealed letter must be added those images of the intercepted, forged, unopened letter, the letter that arrives too late, and letters that cross in the mail” (28). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the intercepted and the unopened letters seem to be the major causes for concern. Yet, Lord Henry does manage to make the letter indecipherable enough that even Dorian and external readers are left to only guess at what he is trying to say,
especially taking into account that the novel becomes a sort of guide for Dorian’s future sins.

As such, the former part of that question, what is the message that Lord Henry is trying to convey to Dorian, is a bit more difficult to answer. Dorian jumps to a conclusion that he then immediately discards: “What had Dorian Gray to do with Sybil Vane’s death? There was nothing to fear. Dorian Gray had not killed her” (Wilde 96). Yet, considering this question at all indicates that Dorian did, in fact, have something to do with Sybil’s death. However, as Lord Henry leaves it up to Dorian to decide how guilty he is for Sybil’s death, the text also leaves it to external readers to come to their own conclusions. The Wilde text is as ambiguous as Lord Henry’s note. This provides one explanation for the newspaper but still leaves the novel as a confusing addition. Jacques Lacan, in his lectures The Purloined Poe, discusses the hints a text may give internal and external readers: “No doubt Poe is having a good time…a suspicion occurs to us: might not this parade…be destined to reveal to us the key words of our drama?” (37). The newspaper and the note then may work as clues, which foreshadow the convoluted relationship that will develop between Dorian and Lord Henry: an awareness of sins and yet a determination to keep them below the surface, to only speak of immoral acts in riddles. This resolve to hide allows Dorian and Lord Henry to remain in contact with each other.

Furthermore, the text is perhaps suggesting that Lord Henry is partially or even as wholly guilty as Dorian. Why give the Dorian the book at all? Again, the ambiguity of the newspaper comes into question. Is the article meant to force Dorian into facing
his guilt or is it to encourage him on this path of sin? This possibility is troubling yet plausible, especially when considered alongside Lord Henry’s novel, its contents, and its effects on Dorian. This idea is not as absurd as it initially appears, for Wilde’s text provides evidence for it. Upon being asked his thoughts on the book, Dorian replies, “I didn’t say I liked it, Harry. I said it fascinated me. There is a great difference” (Wilde 97). Yet, external readers may glean more from Lord Henry’s response: “Ah, you have discovered that?” (Wilde 97). So, Dorian fascinates Lord Henry. This casts the materials he has sent into a new light. To think that Lord Henry is hiding behind his paper masks not to condemn but to urge Dorian forward is not completely ridiculous. Perhaps he wishes to see how far Dorian will go, how far he will fall.

The particular chapter that discusses not only Lord Henry’s missive to Dorian but also the subsequent conversation between writer and reader is an intriguing mix of revelations and the conclusions drawn from these revelations. Diane Cousineau, in *Letters and Labyrinths*, writes, “This coincidence of realization and judgment occurs for the reader as well as character…the reader as ethical deliberator” (106). To take this one step further, the writer in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also becomes an ethical deliberator. Yet, what this deliberation leads to remains vague, whether that applies to Dorian, Lord Henry, or the external readers. Wilde’s text seems to harbor the same fear of revealing too much that is apparent in Lord Henry’s short note. The external and internal readers are forced into an active role both by Lord Henry and by Wilde. In *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, Janet Altman considers the communicative role of letters: “To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact-the call for response from a special
reader within the correspondent’s world” (89). However, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* convolutes this idea, for neither the note nor the narrative ever quite say what response Lord Henry is hoping to draw from Dorian. The conversation between Dorian and Lord Henry that follows also exposes very little of Lord Henry’s purpose, revealing only that fascination was a factor in the constructing and sending of the letter as well as the additional texts. This ambiguity also confuses the readers. Why has Lord Henry sent this letter and what is its, as well as his, purpose? A continual return to this question seems redundant, and yet it is essential. The inability to answer these questions truly illustrates how successful Lord Henry is with his note. Even after reading everything together and knowing Dorian as well as Lord Henry’s backgrounds, external readers will find difficulties in determining the true intention behind the pieces. An unintended recipient, such as Victor, who may manage to claim one piece or even all of them, would have even more difficulties.

In *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, Janet Altman provides an explanation for this confusion: “We read any given letter from at least three points of view— that of the intended or actual recipient as well as the writer and our own” (111). When Dorian Gray is reading the pieces, he is attempting to discover Lord Henry’s intentions while also battling his own guilt. While in most cases, Altman’s theory of multiple ways to read a letter may not be an advantage, it works in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The multiple ways to read cause a certain amount of confusion and mystery that mirrors the narrative arc and character development. To make matters worse, the newspaper and book add to the confusion. These too are written texts, which harkens back to Altman’s
idea that we shape new letters. This is perhaps what Lord Henry is doing, shaping a new letter using his own as well as previously written words. The result is that both the message and the writer become complex and difficult to decipher. Who is speaking to whom and for what purpose? This is never fully answered and yet, perhaps, this shows that the letter is somewhat successful. Lord Henry is able to briefly hide behind his several paper masks. Whether he is using his masks to urge Dorian forward on his path of sin or to condemn him for his previous action is left up to Dorian and the external readers to decide.
Making the False Real:

The Authority of the Letter

Distrust and suspicion of what letters may hold and to whom they may reveal their contents is not only apparent in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This fear also appears within the comedic play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Upon meeting Algernon, Cecily informs him that he, as Ernest, has been writing letters to her for some time. The letters have established, broken, and reestablished an engagement between the two. To increase their authority, their realism, Cecily keeps them in a box within a drawer that holds other mementos, including a ring and a pearl necklace. These bits of jewelry, she claims, were bought by Ernest for her. While Cecily’s foolish behavior is presented in a light hearted manner, a dark suspicion of letters underlies this particular exchange between her and Algernon. The epistles are proof of an engagement, as solid as wearing a ring that indicates marriage or a promise to marry. Had Algernon been engaged to someone else, Cecily could have reasonably presented the letters in court as proof that he had made her a promise. To a lesser extent, she could have simply blackmailed him with the presence of the love letters and not have had to take the matter to court at all.

Because Algernon wishes to marry Cecily and plays along with her delusions, *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains within the boundaries of comedy. However, it could quickly and very easily turn tragic in a moment. Cecily holds the letters and thus the power, a frightening prospect considering that she and Algernon have never met. A stranger can dictate the rest of someone’s life. Jacques Lacan mentions, during his
lecture *The Purloined Poe*, that if one is to “cut a letter into small pieces…it remains the letter it is” (39). The authority of written words can be fathomed here, for Cecily’s letters have formed a relationship between her and Ernest. Destroying them doesn’t obliterate what they have already put into place. Cecily may have shown these letters to others, even mentioning them and their contents to another might have been enough. The disruptive force of the epistles she has penned is perhaps what feeds the dread of what letters and what written words can do. With these epistles, she can easily destroy Algernon’s life or, even more disturbing, any man whose name is Ernest. The letters, even though they are never shown to either Algernon or the audience/external readers, become an imperative part of the narrative arc. Mary A. Favret writes in *Romantic Correspondence*, “The personal letter…is there…as if it were a character in its own right” (137). The letters, similar to the gifts “from Ernest” that Cecily keeps, act much like characters. She, knowing their power, manipulates them just as she manipulates Algernon in order to make what is false a reality.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily is shown to have a rather strong attachment to her diary, in which she is constantly writing. However, her love of the written word becomes particularly clear when she declares, “I don’t like talking seriously in the open air. It looks artificial” (Wilde 390). This is one of the many concrete examples the play provides the audience/external readers that the real appears fictive, artificial, and thus is not taken quite as seriously as the false, which can appear far more real. For instance, both Cecily and Gwendolyn continually discuss how much their amours are suited to the name Ernest, when, in truth, neither suitor actually retains
that particular name; Jack’s discovery that his real name is Ernest at the end has no effect on how Gwendolyn acts towards him during most of the play, when she believes him to be Ernest. Names, however, are spoken words and can be lost to the open air. Letters, however, can have more of an impact, a devastating one possibly, because they are tangible. J.L. Austin states in his lectures *How to do Things with Words*,

“It is worthy of note that…in the American law of evidence, a report of what someone else said is admitted as evidence if what he said is an utterance of our performative kind: because this is regarded as a report not so much of something he *said*, as which it would be hear-say and not admissible as evidence, but rather of something he *did*, an action of his” (13).

This argument illustrates what makes Cecily’s letters so authoritative; she does not simply tell people that Ernest/Algernon has proposed to her but provides physical evidence of him actually doing so with letters and tokens. These mementos are proof, though false, not only of his words but also of his actions.

The first instance of Cecily using inscribed words to manipulate Algernon, however, does not occur with the appearance of Ernest’s supposed letters. It transpires during an earlier conversation while Algernon attempts to propose to Cecily. Her desire to bring words firmly under her control is demonstrated when she rewrites what Algernon says. When he earnestly declares his devotion to her, she replies, after pausing in her writing, “I have not taken down ‘hopelessly’. It doesn’t make much sense, does it?” (Wilde 393). To this, Algernon exclaims her name in surprise but she is as moved
as stone by his emotion, stating only, “Is that the beginning of an entirely new paragraph? Or should it be followed by a note of admiration?” (Wilde 393). The reality of a man proposing to her is not interesting enough; it has a ring of the false in it, for her, until she can write it down. Yet, although she claims that he is dictating to her, she continually alters his words when she writes them down, tweaking his speech so that it seems far more realistic or, at the very least, adheres to her idea of what a proposal should sound like. Memories fade but the pages of her diary, in the future, will reveal the proposal to her as she imagines it should have gone. More troubling, however, is that she doesn’t seem interested in what is happening around her but in what she is writing. The inscribed words must be perfect not the spoken ones. Linda Kauffman, as she considers her earlier book *Discourses of Desire* in her short piece “Not a Love Story,” mentions, “I was startled to discover that…the heroines eventually find more satisfaction in writing about love than in love itself” (198). As applied to Cecily, this statement does not seem startling in the least. Even after Algernon pours out his heart and asks her to marry him, Cecily does not reply but, instead, rather shockingly, exclaims as she gets to her feet, “Oh, you have made me make a blot! And yours is the only real proposal I have ever had in all my life. I should like to have entered it neatly” (Wilde 394, emphasis mine). She is not entering it into her heart but entering it in her diary. To her, it seems, the proposal will only be real and romantic if a written record of it exists.

Cecily appears to have no true emotional attachment to either Algernon or his love; if she did, she would have listened to his proposal rapt instead of writing it down.
and would have answered him immediately. Instead, she becomes upset with him because he has ruined her written account by taking her arm at the conclusion of his fervent plea for her to marry him. J.L. Austin suggests, “The outward utterance is a description, *true or false*, of the occurrence of the inward performance” (9). Algernon’s outward utterance, his physical actions and spoken words, betray his inward emotions. He has, perhaps somewhat foolishly but plausibly, come to love Cecily. She thus becomes a foil to Algernon. She does not love him; she loves nothing more than the emotions and dreams she writes down. She relies only on the authority of what is inscribed, what can be touched and seen, rather than what can be heard and felt. This may explain why she writes in her diary so much and why she seems peculiarly uninterested in Algernon’s heartfelt proposal, at least in its original spoken form. She sees the real as false and the false as real. The proposal she has taken down is false because she constantly interrupted him and altered his words. Yet, it is tangible, solid, and inked onto paper; to her, in short, it is real.

As the conversation moves forward, interrupted briefly by the Merriman, Cecily’s actions and spoken words further confirm her desire for the written and for the fabricated. Algernon, poor man, is forced to ask Cecily a second time if she will marry him. She replies in the affirmative not because she loves him but because she has already said yes to a written proposal from him; this proposal was not Ernest’s but one that she wrote from him to herself. To Algernon’s surprised query of how long they have been thus engaged, she responds, “Three months all but a few days. (*Looks at diary, turns over the page.*) Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday” (Wilde
Again, the audience/external readers as well as Algernon are shown how deeply Cecily puts her faith in what is, above all, purely imagined, invented in dreams and put down on paper; she depends more on her writing, as shown through her checking her diary pages for her engagement date, than what happens in reality. Her decision to marry Algernon is not based on what has really happened—Algernon’s current proposal—but what she has conjured into reality through her writing—the proposal she wrote to herself on his behalf. It also shows a sense of hysteria; she harbors such a strong desire to be in love with a man named Ernest that she refuses to wait for a real man. The writer in one of Derrida’s letters in The Post Card passionately declares, “I am finishing writing you in the street…right away I will continue to write you all the time, that is all I do, interested in that all the time that I can’t see you”(16). This indicates a sort of inner hysteria, a desire to possess someone through writing and words when they cannot be possessed by touch. It harkens back to Austin’s idea that the outward utterance is the show of inward performance. Cecily’s writings are an illustration of her inward desire to be in love with Ernest, any Ernest. Based only upon Jack’s information that he has a brother by the same name, she determines he is to be her lover: “It was very foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest” (Wilde 394). She falls in love, without ever meeting him at all; she writes letters to herself from him, without ever knowing how he may write. It is very foolish indeed. Yet, this foolishness is not limited to Cecily writing in her diary; it extends to her writing letters from Algernon/Ernest to herself.

After Cecily calmly tells Algernon that she keeps his letters in a box beside “the pearl necklace you gave me on my birthday,” she “produces letters tied up with a blue
ribbon” (Wilde 394). At Algernon’s exclamation that he has never written her any letters, she replies, in an accusatory tone, that his silence forced her hand: “My health began to give way under the strain and anxiety. So I wrote your letters for you” (Wilde 395). Her actions and expectations both seem absurd. A stranger who has never met her, let alone fallen in love with her, cannot be expected to write love letters to her. Yet, this fact doesn’t seem to hinder Cecily and her inventive imagination. Indeed, the false, the dream that a man named Ernest loves her, has such a real effect on her that his lack of writing causes her health to deteriorate. So, why doesn’t Cecily simply tell herself that he loves her and make up some excuse for him? Perhaps she doesn’t because she wants physical, tangible proof of his devotion to her. She has, as shown in an earlier conversation with Algernon as well as in her attachment to her diary, faith in what the written word can accomplish, in its authority to make the false real.

Diane Cousineau, in Letters and Labyrinths, discusses how others have used letters to add a touch of realism to what was clearly fabricated: “It is no wonder that the originators of the novel turned to the epistolary form to authenticate the ‘realism’ of their genre as they attempted simultaneously to portray and inscribe the ‘reality’ of personal and social identity” (28). This claim is a substantive one as it seems to say that the actual inclusion of epistles in literary works, such as Jane Austen’s novels, helped both the narrative arc and the characters within it appear more realistic to readers. In this light, Cecily’s actions do not seem quite as absurd; they also provide a further insight into her personality. In Dear Reader, Garret Stewart argues that “reading…become[s] a figure for life” (107). For Cecily, this is true in that the letters
become the figure of Ernest, real and touchable like the gifts and her diary. The written words breathe life into a man that doesn’t really exist, except in Jack’s spoken words and Cecily’s imagination. This recalls Derrida’s insistence in *Of Grammatology* that writing is alive with breath and soul (17). Cecily certainly seems to believe this as is apparent in the numerous letters she has written, which may possibly be copious given that they are held together with a ribbon. With each new letter, Cecily’s Ernest becomes more fleshed out and closer to an actual human being. The epistles may create for him certain personality quirks and characteristic traits. The stack of letters is telling because each one may work to add more breath and soul to Cecily’s imagined Ernest.

Cecily does not stop at merely writing letters to herself; she goes one step further. Instead of simply writing, she makes an effort to make that writing and the relationship it forms between her and Ernest appear real. She has written letters from him to her showing his jealously and anger when she danced with another at a ball. His imagined reaction even leads her to break an engagement that was never real in the first place. She puts emotion into her written words with far more dexterity and feeling than into her spoken ones. Telling Algernon of the letters Ernest— they are not really the same person—wrote to her after she dissolved their relationship, she states, “The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful and so badly spelt that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little” (Wilde 395). The badly spelt words are, of course, of her doing; she must have wished to illustrate Ernest’s wretched emotional state at no longer being engaged to her. Furthermore, the letter still moves her to tears but, conversely, Algernon’s passionate proposal had little impact on her. In her
eyes, Algernon’s cries and declarations pale in comparison to Ernest’s, which are inscribed within her manufactured love letters. Algernon also seems to start believing in the reality the epistles have created. Instead of firmly telling Cecily that he would never do such a thing, he instead worriedly asks her if he apologized for berating her about dancing with another: “But I did take it all back, Cecily, didn’t I?” (Wilde 395). Here the extraordinary authority of the letters, of how quickly they manipulate Algernon and begin altering the fabricated into something genuine, becomes apparent. Fairly soon, Algernon mentions that they have been engaged for three months as if it were true, to which Cecily replies with a comment on how quickly the time has gone by. The instance that shows the audience/external readers how adeptly Cecily and her epistles have manipulated reality as well as Algernon occurs when he responds, “I do not think so. I have found the days very long and dreary without you” (Wilde 395). He speaks as if he is now feeling the same emotions that Cecily wrote about in “his” letters to her. She has succeeded, to some extent, in altering reality with her written words.

Cecily’s faith in the written word falters on only one account. She has the letters delivered to her. This action seems odd, at first. Why would the young woman, having written the letters, not simply keep them to herself like her diary? An answer can be found in Linda Kauffman’s statement in “Not a Love Story”: “The text is thus an active exertion, an acrobatic exercise, a performance that involves many postures of passion” (295). The delivery of an epistle is a posture of passion. Cecily also chooses to act out this posture of love, which includes delivering/receiving a letter. She states to Algernon, “So I wrote your letters…and had them posted to me in the village by the maid” (Wilde

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Yet, why she doesn’t simply hand them to her maid to hand them back to her at a later date remains unanswered. Moreover, her using the post seems odd, especially given her earlier statement, “I grew tired of asking the postman every morning if he had a London letter for me” (Wilde 394). Her words seem to show a distrust of and frustration with the post. Diane Cousineau’s take on the post mirrors Cecily’s wariness of the post office: “Blunder lurks directly within the postal system” (35). Why does Cecily take this risk? Wouldn’t it be much easier to have the maid deliver the post directly to her without having it go through the post office? In The Post Card, Derrida also shows a lack of faith in the post office’s abilities; he writes of it, “Master stroke and great theater…very great post…must go through it, pass by it, sooner or later, through this great sorting center, must have itself taxed, stamped, and above all obliterated” (31). Cecily is taking a great chance here. The letters she has so carefully penned and is now paying, presumably, to have her maid post can be lost, delivered late, or completely destroyed. One possible explanation for taking this risk can be found in Cecily’s words. The postman, who was never able to tell her that a letter from London had arrived, caused a decline in her well-being. Cecily expected a letter, believed that a man in love should send one as an outward demonstration of his inward passion. For the false to become real, it must follow the same path as the real. The same postman will now be able to tell Cecily that indeed a letter has arrived for her. The contrived can now fill the gap left by the authentic.

Yet, despite all the faith and conviction Cecily pours into her written words, the audience/external readers and Algernon are never allowed a single glimpse of either her diary or her letters. Janet Altman, in Epistolary Approaches to a Form, gives a great deal
of credit to the epistolary readers, both internal and external: “The epistolary reader is empowered to intervene, to correct style, to give shape to the story, often to become an agent and narrator in his own right” (91). This active role of the reader was seen in Austen’s texts, such as when Elizabeth continually reread and reworked the meanings of Darcy’s letter or when Lord Henry’s brief note forced Dorian and external readers to formulate their own conclusions about his message. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, however, Cecily stops both internal as well as external readers/the audience from becoming agents, from playing an active role. They are not allowed even the honor of becoming passive readers.

Cecily forcefully retains full control over her written words. Neither Algernon’s nor the audience/external reader’s interference is to be borne because it has the potential to become a disruptive force; it can take her devised relationship with Ernest on a path separate from the one she has carefully inscribed. Interpretations differing from her own are not to be allowed, which is perhaps why neither Algernon nor the audience/external readers are permitted to either hear or see any portion of the letters she has written. Unlike Frank Churchill’s letter, which is open to viewing for all and has at least three different readings, Cecily’s epistles “from Ernest” are kept carefully hidden. This emphasizes that she is writing to herself from herself, even though she may attempt to convince herself that her letters are from Ernest. The letters aid her in fueling her fantasies. Anne Bower writes in her piece, “Dear –,” in *Epistolary Histories*. “One becomes...a kind of spy on both the internal letter writer and internal letter reader” (159). The problem with this idea is that Cecily is both. She seems aware that spying
can occur and appears determined to circumvent this at all costs. When Algernon politely pleads of his letters, “Oh, do let me read them, Cecily” (Wilde 395), he is refused. The reason Cecily provides for this rejection is that “they would make [him] far too conceited” (Wilde 395). Yet, this explanation seems odd when compared to her earlier refusal to let Algernon read her diary. Then, she did not allow his eyes to scan her pages but, instead, stated, “When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy” (Wilde 395). Will the letters then be open to perusal once they are published? Why does it seem less dangerous for these writings to be read after they have entered the public sphere? Janet Altman, in her article “Epistolarity: Letter Book,” writes, “When it is reinscribed in a book for publication, however, the letter is readdressed to a new readership” (19). The new readership is imperative in Cecily’s case. The letters and diary are all addressed directly to her. She is reluctant to have the readership change just yet, to surrender control to someone else, even her fiancé.

Cecily hoards her letters as proof of her relationship with Ernest. She doesn’t want the real and the imagined to collide; perhaps she fears that when it does, her manufactured love will fall to pieces. If Algernon reads “his” letters, he may break off the engagement because he realizes that he is nothing like the man Cecily has invented. Janet Altman, in Epistolary Approaches to A Form, writes that “letters are collected to either prevent further reading or to extend the circle of readers” (108). Cecily then collects her letters to bar others from reading them. This suggests that, while Cecily comprehends the influence letters can have on people, she also understands that they do have their limitations. She adds the power of her fantasies to them, manipulating not
only the words but who reads them so that she can create the effect she desires. Garret Stewart mentions in Dear Reader, “Reading thus stand as a mode of desire- and, more, a mode of knowing-dependent on that ‘openness’ that breeds affection. Nothing here is left to discursive chance” (107). He refers to Wentworth’s letter to Anne at the end of Persuasion but his analysis is also applicable to The Importance of Earnest. No true openness can exist between Cecily and Algernon because she is never quite open with herself. Furthermore, she leaves so little to discursive chance, in fact, that she merely describes the contents of “Ernest’s” letters to Algernon; her descriptions are all that he and the audience/external readers ever see of the epistles. Diane Cousineau writes, “Letter writing gives way and…the dual relation of epistolary exchange is almost always transgressed by the presence of a third” (28). Ironically, the audience/external readers are not necessarily the intruders here. At least, they are not the only intruders. The third is, in fact, Algernon. Cecily, her letters bound with blue ribbon, refuses to let anyone transgress into the world she has built with the paper bricks of her words.

Wilde’s play, The Importance of Being Earnest, and Cecily’s manipulations of the written word within it are an excellent example of the power of letters and why this power should be feared. Cecily is successful with her notes not merely because they exist and create tangible evidence of a relationship but because Algernon foolishly falls in her trap; he begins to take the evidence as truth when it is naught more than a lie. He allows her words to control him. Jacques Lacan, in The Purloined Poe, urges, “If we could admit that a letter has completed its destiny after fulfilling its function, the ceremony of returning letters would be a less common close to the extinction of the
fires of love’s feast” (40). His comment touches on the power of a letter, how it continues to have an impact even once it has reached its destination and been read. Cecily seems to understand this. Additionally, Lacan’s comment provides a reason for why Cecily brings up the letters in conversation at all. She has secured Algernon’s affections and procured an engagement. She has no real reason to mention the letters. In fact, their very existence should probably be a cause for embarrassment and shame. However, she believes in the power of the letters, which is possibly why she tells Algernon about them. It allows her a chance to make her dreams into a reality. Indeed, to some part, the letters alter her fabricated relationship with Ernest/Algernon into a sort of reality.
Oscar Wilde’s letter, *De Profundis*, works differently from the other letters so far discussed. It doesn’t appear within the framework of a novel or other narrative arc; it is a stand-alone piece. Yet, its content manifests many of the same qualities apparent in other epistles that appear in both Wilde’s and Austen’s works: revelations, knowledge that the reader(s) cannot respond immediately, and use of the written word’s power. In Derrida’s *The Post Card*, one of the letters contains the question, “Where do you ‘see’ me…left, right, or directly before you?” (19). The suggestion in this query is that readers conjure up an image of the writer. Yet, that image can change with each new reader into whose hands a letter falls. The writer has only a few ways with which to attempt control over the readers’ interpretations. Cecily, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, chooses to do this by writing the letters herself and becoming their only reader.

The writer of *De Profundis*, in contrast, employs a method based on the power of words to construct an image. The rough title Wilde provided upon leaving prison and handing the letter over to Robert Ross was “Epistola: In Carceret Vinculis”. These words, roughly translated, mean “Epistle: In Prison and Chains.” An image is constructed of a constrained writer with words as the only escape. Upon publishing the letter, Robert Ross took this one step further, adding *De Profundis*, which comes from Psalm 130, as the title. Translated from Latin, this means “from the depths,” which can be further extended to mean from the depths of despair, sorrow, etc. The choice of using these particular words needs to be analyzed. They work to form an image within the
readers’ minds. Furthermore, like Wilde’s original suggestion for a title, the Latin creates a sense of profoundness, of elevation. This letter is not to be taken simply as one of revenge or as Wilde’s petty lashing out at Lord Alfred Douglas. Readers are thus being tuned to the correct frequency; they are being told that they must receive the epistle as a serious piece of literary writing. With a few simple words, readers are being manipulated to feel sorrow and sympathy for the writer. Whether the depths and incarceration are literal, emotional, or social seems to be an unimportant point; simply the presence of some sort of depth and incarceration is enough to paint certain images of despair, which may elicit sympathy. Moreover, the image of Wilde as a dandy is being forcefully pushed aside. The full impact of Robert Ross’ choice of words, however, can perhaps be seen when looking at the sonnets Lord Alfred Douglas wrote when he was imprisoned; he entitled his work, “In Excelsis,” meaning “From the Heights,” which was to stand as mirror or foil to Wilde’s De Profundis. The titles of Wilde’s prison epistle give a hint about its content.

Apart from the title, one of the most intriguing aspects of De Profundis is how many letters are included within it. Though one can reasonably argue that the writer/narrator and Oscar Wilde are two separate entities, for the sake of this argument, they will be considered one and the same. The many affects these included letters have on the writer then work to not only show external readers the impact epistles can have but also the extent of their disruptive force. Though they are only pieces of the whole, these parts, at times, stand in for the whole; at times, they appear to contain the entire message of De Profundis’ first half packed into their brief lines. They are, in short,
synecdoche for *De Profundis*. These short letters or, at least, the mention of these letters within *De Profundis* helps to create several messages, which illustrates the varied and authoritative impact that letters can have upon their readers.

Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* is written to Bosie, who is most likely Lord Alfred Douglas. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, the epistle begins with a mention of Bosie’s letters. Within the first paragraph, Wilde writes his reason for penning this epistle: “I have determined to write to you…as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you…except such as gave me pain” (Wilde 980). Linda Kauffman, in “Not a Love Story,” discusses the passionate drive behind love letters, stating the writer resembles “the infant who simply wants, who is desperate for some-any-emotional connection” (203). Bosie’s silence, his lack of letters to Wilde, severed all ties, and this epistle could work to forge anew that broken link. Moreover, *De Profundis* itself provides evidence that Kauffman’s argument is not absurd. Wilde writes, “But I said to myself: ‘At all costs I must keep Love in my heart. If I go to prison without Love what will become of my Soul?’ The letters I wrote to you…from Holloway were my efforts to keep Love” (Wilde 1004). He was in Holloway during the beginning of his imprisonment. By the time he reached the cells where he wrote *De Profundis*, he was nearing the end of his incarceration. He chose to write again to Bosie, not his wife, perhaps in a desperate attempt to have some sort of emotional connection with the man he once loved.
The deep emotional scar that Bosie’s letters left upon Wilde becomes clearer when the background of *De Profundis* is looked at. Warden Major Nelson allowed Wilde to write during the latter part of his imprisonment but only one sheet at a time. Lord Alfred Douglas’ painful letters had such an impact on Wilde that, with the choice of writing anything he wished to, he chose to write a letter to Bosie, one painstaking page at a time. Perhaps, this epistle was an attempt to make the memory of Bosie and his father’s written words less painful and more manageable. Wilde mentions their words with a sort of bitter resentment: “The letter I received from you…on the morning I let you take me down to the Police Court…was one of the worst you ever wrote, for the most shameful reason. Between you both [Bosie and his father] I lost my head” (Wilde 985). *De Profundis* then could be a way to regain control and illustrate that he is thinking straight again. Lord Alfred Douglas, as he appears in *De Profundis*, seems to have had a rather strong influence on Wilde: “The basis of character is will-power, and my will-power became absolutely subject to yours” (Wilde 984). Wilde seems to be arguing that Bosie took away his will-power along with his ability to make his own choices. This epistle could be an attempt to display that he is, once again, in control of his will-power. He *chooses* to write to Bosie.

Writing to Bosie, however, may also have worked as a cathartic action, especially since Bosie could not reply back. The same sort of reasoning lies behind Mr. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth and Frank Churchill’s letter to his aunt. Diane Cousineau’s statement that “the letter also reveals the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of the reciprocity of such communication” (26) touches on the theme that runs through these
epistles. The writer is somewhat protected and can thus write what he/she wishes because he/she doesn’t have to fear a face to face retaliation; a letter is a one-sided conversations. Yet, why write at all? Some psychiatrists tell their patients to write letters of love or hate to those people to whom they cannot reveal their emotions. Writing these feelings down has a cathartic effect. Throughout De Profundis, Wilde mentions repeatedly how Bosie’s presence often tempered his anger and made him grow weak: “I gave up to you always” (Wilde 985). Within his prison cell, distanced from Bosie, he can now write down the feelings and emotions he often suppressed in Bosie’s presence. Anne Bower pinpoints an important part of communicating with letters: “A letter text embodies the negotiations of connection: separation and union, here and there, now and then, absence and presence…the letter form would also seem to acknowledge the fragmentary and discursive as valid components of discussion, and recognized that distance and absence will never be overcome completely” (157). This inability to overcome the distance appears to work to Wilde’s advantage, allowing him the ability to no longer be a fool; he claims, “I was such a one too long” (Wilde 981). The letter, particularly the second half, is framed as an awakening. When he discusses his relationship with Bosie, he appears to talk about past events as if they had occurred while his mind was wrapped in a fog. Talking about his financial ruin, Wilde mentions his paying for Bosie’s wild tastes, especially for expensive meals: “Out of the reckless dinners with you nothing remains but the memory that too much was eaten and too much was drunk” (Wilde 984). Writing now at a distance, both from Bosie and the past,
Wilde’s words appear to show that he is finally able to comprehend Bosie’s corrupt influence on him and how it led to his imprisonment.

In a similar vein, Wilde appears to be making an attempt to rewrite his history; he seeks to absolve himself and his role in the events that led his life into the ruin it is now. Derrida, in *The Post Card*, mentions, “Condition for the pertinence and performance of a text, of what the text ‘is worth’ beyond what is called into empirical subjectivity, supposing that such a thing exists as soon as it speaks, writes, and substitutes one object for another, substitutes and adds itself as an object to another, in a word, as it supplements” (322). In such a manner, the contents, at least the first half directly regarding Bosie, seem to work at supplementing and substituting Wilde’s version of what happened for Bosie’s recollection. Yet, why is this important? Wilde, in fact, appears to believe that it will have little impact on Bosie at all, for he continually writes of how he believes the words will soon be forgotten by Lord Alfred Douglas, who will go complaining to his mother (Wilde 980). So, why write to Bosie then? Janet Altman writes, in *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, “If writing is partially shaped by potential reading in a letter narrative, it is not surprising that the act of reading should itself be an important narrative event” (92). At first, this theory doesn’t seem to apply to *De Profundis*. However, that quickly changes when external readers take into account that the letter may be addressed as much to Wilde as it is to Bosie, working somewhat like a journal entry. He may be as much a potential reader of *De Profundis* as Bosie. The important narrative event could possibly be that, by reading his own letter, he may be able to change the narrative of his life, cast it and himself, as a character within it, in
a new light. Diane Cousineau argues, “Invariably as one writes to another…one addresses self” (30). Wilde, in writing De Profundis, may be seeking to affect himself as much as Lord Alfred Douglas. Again, Janet Altman’s critical discourse on letters gives a better understanding of De Profundis and its addressee. In “Epistolarity: Letter Book,” she writes, “It is to some extent both autobiographically undressed (potentially offering insight into the author’s ‘private’ life and thought at that moment) and rhetorically addressed (constituted as a speech act to have an effect on a specific addressee on a particular day)” (19). The letter then can change addressees at different times. One morning, the writer of De Profundis may imagine handing the letter over to Bosie and, that night, reread it himself.

Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray provides yet another explanation for Wilde’s choice to write to Bosie. After haranguing Sybil, Dorian writes her an extensive letter that seems to somewhat allay his feelings of guilt for treating her so poorly: “He covered page after page with wild words of sorrow…There is a luxury in self-reproach. When we blame ourselves we feel that no one else has the right to blame us. It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution” (Wilde 78). When one chooses to confess, one gains a sort of control over one’s sins and one’s actions. It is a choice to pen a letter or to speak to a priest. This desire to regain control over self and the relationship with Bosie, in De Profundis, also seems to be born, at least partly, from letters; first Bosie’s letters to him and secondly Wilde’s letters, which Bosie published without permission. This epistle seems an effort to establish Wilde as the mature, sensible party in the relationship between him and Lord Alfred Douglas. The first half
of the letter appears dedicated to setting Bosie on a decidedly lower level than Wilde. To greater extent, it also works as a confession, one that Wilde has full control over. The epistle allows Wilde to place the majority of blame upon Bosie for every part of his life that has gone awry, including his failed trials and financial ruin. Yet, like Dorian, he seems to take an odd sort of ironic pleasure in writing that the blame falls upon his shoulders: “I will begin by telling you that I blame myself terribly” (Wilde 395). Within just the first few lines of this particular paragraph, the word blame is used four times. Yet, the word is oddly hollow, for he mainly blames himself for not being strong enough to establish a distance between him and the frivolous Bosie. In Of Grammatology, Derrida suggests, “There is therefore good and bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (17). As much as De Profundis may seem a confession, an unregulated outpouring of Wilde’s bottled emotions, a spiritual journey, or even a vengeful letter, it is written with clear technique, if not clear purpose.

Additionally, Wilde’s letter makes an attempt to shift the balance of power. Bosie is not imprisoned; instead, he is out there in the world, showing little care for a man who loves him. Instead of writing to that man, Lord Alfred Douglas is publishing that man’s letters without the authority granting him the ability to do so. This seems to deeply bother Wilde: “You yourself have walked free among the flowers. From me the world of colour and motion has been taken away” (Wilde 981). Taking this into accordance, very little can be done to shift the power; even if Bosie reads the letter and it affects him, he will still be outside the prison walls that hold Wilde. However, even if
Wilde succeeds in creating a shift only within his own mind and not others’, it is a victory of sorts.

The letter is a battle, Wilde against himself and, focusing on the first half, Wilde against Bosie. Every battle needs weapons. Janet Altman, in *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, speaks of affairs, relationships, and wars when she writes, “Letters are stockpiled as weapons” (108). This stockpile can be either mental or physical. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the letters Cecily writes to herself from Ernest are collected and, in a way, used as missiles against Algernon. In *De Profundis*, Wilde stockpiled the letters he mentions within the recesses of his mind if not the recesses of his desk. With a nasty sort of grudge, he fires them one after another at Bosie. When Wilde sought to break off the relationship, Bosie sent him letters and telegrams, which culminated with a note to Wilde’s wife. *De Profundis’* pages are littered with references to these telegrams almost as if they were bullets fired into Wilde’s resolve and will-power, one after the other. In this epistle, he writes of these letters, each mention of them almost running into another; he throws them back at Bosie like slaps, perhaps to show how they deteriorated his will and how deeply they hurt him.

Yet, Wilde’s letters did not always hit the mark. He discusses writing a particular letter to Bosie when he was ill, stating that Bosie should spend more time with him. Instead of making him feel guilty, this letter led to heated argument. Lord Alfred Douglas did not apologize or make excuses, as Wilde expected, but instead forced him to retreat from their hotel room and to the parlor two flights below. As if this were not humiliation enough, Bosie then sent Wilde a letter on his birthday, which
further ridiculed both his note and his retreat. Lord Alfred Douglas gained the upper hand. *De Profundis* allows Wilde to write a new epistle and to use his words to hit the marks his previous letters were unable to. Derrida, in *The Post Card*, writes, “I write you the letters of a traveling salesman hoping that you hear the laughter and the song—the only ones…that cannot be sent, nor the tears. At bottom, I am only interested in what cannot be sent off, cannot be dispatched in any case” (14-15). Feelings of guilt, remorse, love, and power are difficult to put into words and dispatch in a sealed bundle of carefully folded pages. Yet, the writer of *De Profundis* appears to be, like Derrida’s writer, interested in what cannot be sent off. The attempted rewriting of his history and the use of letters as weapons shows the struggle that lies between his penned lines. Wilde seems to be trying to convince himself as much as Bosie of his moral high ground; this is not a simple task to accomplish within the confines of a letter. Garrett Stewart, in *Dear Reader*, writes, “Under the sign of openness, epistemology becomes ethics” (110). The battle in the first half of the letter is, plausibly, deciding or proving who is the more ethical of the two, Bosie or Wilde. Wilde has been imprisoned, in short, for his lack of ethics. The epistle he writes is a way to fire back, to finish those sentences that were cut short in court. *De Profundis* is a weapon fired not only at Bosie, at Wilde himself, but also at all those people who respected him and his work only to look down their noses at him once he went through his trials. It is, in a short, a way of fighting back, in reforming his character as an ethical one. Certainly, such things are difficult to send off in letters; yet, Wilde attempts it.
Perhaps one of the most intriguing written communications that Wilde includes in *De Profundis* is not between him and Lord Alfred Douglas but between him and Bosie’s mother. The back and forth between him and his lover’s mother seems to have had a great impact on Wilde, who first wrote fervently back to her. He agreed, as he states in *De Profundis*, that her son was of a frivolous destructive sort and should be sent abroad. Later, he wrote back disappointedly when Bosie’s mother asked for a rebuilding of the relationship between the two men because Bosie missed him dreadfully. Yet, the intriguing aspect of this communication is not how deeply it affected Wilde and his actions as related to Lord Alfred Douglas. It is intriguing because it illustrated Wilde’s desire to retain complete control over what these letters could reveal. No quotes exist but, instead, this communication, like many of the other letters Wilde refers to in *De Profundis*, are given to external readers through his eyes; they are summarized in his words. In fact, though Wilde includes many letters, he rarely quotes them word for word. On occasion, he will inscribe a few short words of Bosie’s verbatim but this is his only concession. Like Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he refuses to surrender control and to allow readers any view of the letters that is not his own.

This desire for domination over words, both his and others’, seems somewhat unsurprising. His words have so often been taken away from him and manipulated against him; they were used as evidence against him in court, which he also mentions in *De Profundis*. Furthermore, he berates Bosie not only in the beginning of his epistle but
later for making what should be private public. While in prison, he received news that Bosie wished to publish certain Wilde letters. This, apparently, made him furious:

“What letters? The letters I had written to you from Holloway Prison!

The letters that should have been to you things sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world! These actually were the letters you proposed to publish for the jaded décadent to wonder at, for the greedy feuilletoniste to chronicle, for the little lions of the Quartier Latin to gape and mouth at! Had there been nothing in your own heart to cry out against such a sacrilege” (Wilde 1007)

This tirade illustrates not only the great emotional ties that Wilde believed letters formed between two people but also an almost paralyzing fear of revelation. He imagines the unintended recipients of his letters and seems to hide his fear of their responses beneath a sardonic tone. This perhaps explains why, apart from the fact that he did not have letters to quote directly from, Wilde appears so determined to fully control the words and letters in his epistle.

The question then is whether or not Wilde was successful with *De Profundis*. However, many problems arise when contemplating the answer. The purpose of this epistle is difficult to pinpoint as it morphs from an admonishment of Bosie to a written spiritual journey. Furthermore, as Janet Altman discussed, the addressee is not a fixed and obvious person. Perhaps the second half suggests that Wilde did succeed in finding some mental peace regarding his failed relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and his ruined life. Yet, the issue here is that not only is the addressee not a fixed person but the
writer is not one as well. Diane Cousineau, in *Letters and Labyrinths*, mentions that letters have “time lapses built in…who writes is not whose words are read” (29). Lord Alfred Douglas read the letter after Wilde was released from prison. Much may have changed about Wilde and his outlook from the time he wrote the letter to the time he left prison; this is already apparent in the change that occurs in the tone of *De Profundis* from the first half to the second. More recently, Wilde’s works have now entered into the literary cannon. Even without the titles, modern day readers may already have a great deal of sympathy for a skilled playwright who died before his time.

This changing readership and changing image of the writer alters the dynamics of *De Profundis*. While modern day readers may feel shame and guilt at what Wilde had to suffer, the readers of his time may have simply laughed or shaken their heads, especially since the letter was published in pieces with many edits. *De Profundis* serves as a wonderful example of Derrida’s somewhat enigmatic comment in the introduction of *The Post Card*: “Signers are not inevitably to be confused with senders, nor the addressees with the receivers, that is with the readers (you for example)” (5). Adding to this confusion, *De Profundis* stands alone as a literary piece. Yet, like epistles set within the framework of a novel or play, this letter is often, perhaps inevitably, set within the narrative arc of Oscar Wilde’s life. Readers may find it difficult to separate the writer of *De Profundis* from Oscar Wilde and Bosie from Lord Alfred Douglas. Yet, perhaps, this is the success of *De Profundis*. Oscar Wilde’s epistle can be read over and over again with each reading revealing something new; its many embedded letters may also provide clues to its various message(s).
CONSIDERING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT ROLES OF EPISTLES

In Derrida’s *The Post Card*, the writer in the *envois* laments, “‘Library’ and the ‘history’ themselves are precisely but ‘posts’… what would our correspondence be, and its secret, indecipherable, in this terrifying archive?” (27). The epistles analyzed in this thesis all seem to fit into this category; they are posts that become a part of characters’ histories, archived into their minds and hearts. Yet, Derrida’s description seems particularly fitting as applied to *De Profundis*. Oscar Wilde’s letter has become both a part of libraries as well as a part of history. Its secrets, which may have been indecipherable to Lord Alfred Douglas, are still somewhat, well, secret; modern readers can only guess and speculate on what the purpose and message of *De Profundis* was. Furthermore, when compared to the archive of so many letters within the literary and historical world, how much importance can be paid to and how much time spent on trying to fathom one epistle’s secrets? When readers peruse the pages of Austen’s works or watch Wilde’s plays, how much attention do they pay to the letters embedded within? In *Emma*, Frank Churchill’s letter is read then quickly discarded; no one caring to peruse it too intently, except possibly Mrs. Weston. Even in *Pride and Prejudice* where Darcy’s letter has such a drastic impact on the novel and Elizabeth, it soon falls to the wayside. Darcy’s actions eventually overshadow and suppress his written words. As seen in both Wilde and Austen’s works, with the exception of *De Profundis*, letters seem to create an impact and then are forgotten. So why look at them at all? What is their importance when they can so easily be lost in the terrifying archive of library and history?
In a lecture on Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, Jacques Lacan discusses the purloined letter, which the minister obtains then forgets about. Lacan states, “The minister, though not making use of the letter, comes to forget it. But the letter…does not forget him. It forgets him so little that it transforms him more and more” (47). This argument is the basis on which this entire thesis is built: the power of letters to transform and to affect both their readers and their writers. A letter is a powerful tool utilized within novels, plays, or even on its own to draw forth particular reactions from intended, even unintended, recipients. Sometimes the purpose of the letter can become convoluted, which happens with Lord Henry’s note in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Wilde’s *De Profundis*. Yet, readers may find it difficult to firmly state that even these confusing epistles don’t work as manipulations; even though these letters are almost like riddles, they still succeed at creating an emotional impact on their readers. Janet Altman, in *Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, writes, “In the letter narrative, we not only see correspondents struggle with pen, ink, and paper; we also see their message being read and interpreted by their intended or unintended recipients” (88). Frank Churchill tries to make this struggle very clear as he writes down what he is—supposedly—feeling and doing during the time he spends writing his letter. External readers then see his letter being interpreted in three different ways by three different people. They then also have to formulate their own interpretations. No wonder the writer in Derrida’s *The Post Card* feared his message might be lost: “Small dots on an i lost over immense space” (26-27). This fear is realized in Cecily’s insistent control over
her letters. Her anxiety that her words will alter when read by another seems to push her to become the only reader of “Ernest’s” letters.

So, with the possibility that their purpose and the overall message of their letters may get lost, why do writers, both characters and authors, choose to use epistles at all? Garret Stewart argues that letters allow a great deal to be said in only a few pages; in *Dear Reader*, he writes, “Such an economy of telling enlists, stalls, entices anew, derails, and then again retrieves and fulfills the reader’s participatory activity” (110). The letter then can be used to accomplish a variety of goals, to manipulate readers in myriad ways. Its fragmentary nature-writers can pause and deliberate their words- and its ability to stem immediate responses gives the writer many advantages. Readers, whether they are the writer’s intended or unintended addressees, become participants in creating a history, relationship, or any other link that a letter seeks to forge or to break. Linda Kauffman, in “Not a Love Story,” provides a different reason for utilizing written communication: “Writing never ceases because desire never ceases” (204). Letters can be used to form links between those that are separated; they can forge relationships like in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or give a sense of being in a relationship that has dissolved like in *De Profundis*. The letters provide the writers an immense amount of power. The writers can even use letters to manipulate themselves as much as their readers. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy’s letter to Edward suggests that she is attempting to rewrite her history, which involves the relationship she had with Edward and the relationship she now has with Robert. She may not be able to fool either internal or external readers but she may succeed in fooling herself.

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Yet, the writer doesn’t hold all the power. The readers’ interpretations can also alter the words and make them fit into the perception the reader has of the writer. Recipients, which are not always readers, also play a major role in how a letter is deciphered and how it reaches other readers. This phenomenon is perhaps seen best when one looks at the extensive publishing history attached to De Profundis, which went through many edits and editions. Janet Altman analyzes the effect of publication on written words in “Epistololarity: Letter Book”: “When it is reinscribed in a book for publication, however, the letter is readdressed to a new readership and often redressed (corrected, revised, etc.) by the publisher (be it original author, reader, etc.), who negotiates a new, more perdurable relationship between the letters and reading public for whom the correspondence is now intended” (19). The addressees change as the letter changes hands and so do the contents of these letters, in a way. When the soldiers whose letters are compiled in Letter Book wrote home, they may have just been trying to allay their families’ fears, to convey their well-being, or to attempt a link with those that they dearly missed. Once in the book, however, their letters become historical documents. They can be read to glean information about a war or certain battles. The epistles and notes can also become reminders, mementos of those that were lost in the war; the contents of the letters, in such a case, are no longer as important as their physical, tangible presence.

Letters, more often than not, are able to manipulate writers, readers, and recipients. They have a power to influence those into whose hands they fall and from whose hands they are born. Even the look or length of a letter can say much about it.
The addressee(s) and signer(s) of epistles can also reveal as much if not more than their contents. Yet, letters seem to be falling into oblivion. Diane Cousineau, in *Letters and Labyrinths*, notes, “At a time when the traditional form of the letter is in danger of being rendered obsolete by e-mail…the letter’s pivotal position…makes it all the more beguiling as an artifact” (36). Writers and readers seem to be forgetting the power of letters and how they can transform those they come into contact with.

Yet, a few published writers seem to remember the influence a well-constructed or even a not so well-constructed epistle, like Lucy’s note to Edward, can have. Annie Bowers and Mary Ann Shaffer’s well-received 2008 novel *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* relies heavily on letters to help develop characters and move the narrative forward. The letters in this novel are presented and used much like the other letters mentioned throughout this paper. However, perhaps the most noticeable example of utilizing letters and their inherent manipulative power appears in J. K. Rowling’s highly successful *Harry Potter* series. Unlike the letters analyzed in this thesis, the letters in her texts arguably retain much of their original power as they seem to escape the flattening generic font that the publishing industry generally forces upon epistles. Not only does Rowling include letters in her narratives but she also gives them to readers as tangible documents. The epistles in her books truly provide readers what Janet Altman described in *Epistolary Approaches to a Form* as “the experience of reading” (88). By the time they reach the third book in the series, astute readers will be able to pinpoint a letter as Dumbledore’s just from his slanted writing. Harry doesn’t need a signature to know that the letter has come from Dumbledore and neither do the
external readers: “Harry had just recognized the thin slanting writing on the parchment” (Rowling 181). J.K. Rowling has made it possible for the readers to do the same: recognize the writer of a letter without the presence of a signature.

Yet, Rowling doesn’t stop at giving each of her characters and their handwriting very distinctive features. She also adds physical traits to letters that are only hinted at in most books. For instance, in Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth talks about how cramped Mr. Darcy’s writing is but external readers never see this. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, when Hagrid writes to Hermione informing her that Buckbeak will be executed, the narrator describes the letter: “The parchment was damp, and enormous tear-drops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was very difficult to read” (Rowling 291). For most authors, this description would be enough. In fact, most texts provide readers no more than such descriptions. For instance, modern day readers are far more likely to read De Profundis in a neatly printed form, which is certainly not how it was written. How much more or less powerful would De Profundis be if it was read as photographed copy, where readers could easily see Wilde’s penmanship? Would the writer’s struggle between ink and paper that Janet Altman discusses be clear to perceive, just in the appearance of a letter and not its words? Perhaps, it would, which makes it all the more lamentable that the stark electronic e-mails are overtaking the tangible paper letters. However, allowing readers to see this sort of bared and exposed form of epistles and their writers is not common practice, at least not in published texts. Yet, Rowling provides her readers letters that resemble photocopies. For example, in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, external readers receive the narrator’s
description of Hagrid’s sorrowful letter but they also get to view it as Harry, Ron, and Hermione would have seen it. They too can clearly look at the blots Hagrid’s tears have made and also experience the difficulty of reading his words through these blots. Furthermore, Rowling inscribes epistles in her texts in a manner similar to Jane Austen’s, whose novels give the letter to internal and external readers whole and uninterrupted by either the narrator or other internal characters. From Jane Austen to J.K. Rowling, epistles become tools for writers, who can be authors or characters, to manipulate readers and recipients; such is the power of the written words as it appears in letters.
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