

Epistolary Novels

Epistolary novels are written in the form of letters. The informal and personal nature of a first person letter allows us to empathise with the characters and the use of different letter writers allows us to see events from different points of view. Letters also allow us to skip large chunks of time in which nothing happens as the characters only write letters about important events. In 'Dracula' Stoker uses diary extracts and newspaper reports in addition to just letters to tell his story.

Letter, Mina Harker to Lucy Westenra
Buda-Pesth, 24 August.

"My dearest Lucy,
"I know you will be anxious to hear all that has happened since we parted at the railway station at Whitby.

"Well, my dear, I got to Hull all right, and caught the boat to Hamburg, and then the train on here. I feel that I can hardly recall anything of the journey, except that I knew I was coming to Jonathan, and that as I should have to do some nursing, I had better get all the sleep I could. I found my dear one, oh, so thin and pale and weak looking. All the resolution has gone out of his dear eyes, and that quiet dignity which I told you was in his face has vanished. He is only a wreck of himself, and he does not remember anything that has happened to him for a long time past. At least, he wants me to believe so, and I shall never ask.

"He has had some terrible shock, and I fear it might tax his poor brain if he were to try to recall it. Sister Agatha, who is a good creature and a born nurse, tells me that he wanted her to tell me what they were, but she would only cross herself, and say she would never tell. That the ravings of the sick were the secrets of God, and that if a nurse through her vocation should hear them, she should respect her trust.

"She is a sweet, good soul, and the next day, when she saw I was troubled, she opened up the subject my poor dear raved about, added, 'I can tell you this much, my dear. That it was not about anything which he has done wrong himself, and you, as his wife to be, have no cause to be concerned. He has not forgotten you or what he owes to you. His fear was of great and terrible things, which no mortal can treat of.'

"I do believe the dear soul thought I might be jealous lest my poor dear should have fallen in love with any other girl. The idea of my being jealous about Jonathan! And yet, my dear, let me whisper, I felt a thrill of joy through me when I knew that no other woman was a cause for trouble. I am now sitting by his bedside, where I can see his face while he sleeps. He is waking!

"When he woke he asked me for his coat, as he wanted to get something from the pocket. I asked Sister Agatha, and she brought all his things. I saw amongst them was his notebook, and was going to ask him to let me look at it, for I knew that I might find some clue to his trouble, but I suppose he must have seen my wish in my eyes, for he sent me over to the window, saying he wanted to be quite alone for a moment.

"Then he called me back, and he said to me very solemnly, 'Wilhelmina', I knew then that he was in deadly earnest, for he has never called me by that name since he asked me to marry him. 'You know, dear, my ideas of the trust between husband and wife. There should be no secret, no concealment. I have had a great shock, and when I try to think of what it is I feel my head spin round, and I do not know if it was real of the dreaming of a madman. You know I had brain fever, and that is to be mad. The secret is here, and I do not want to know it. I want to take up my life here, with our marriage.' For, my dear, we had decided to be married as soon as the formalities are complete. 'Are you willing, Wilhelmina, to share my ignorance? Here is the book. Take it and keep it, read it if you will, but never let me know."

Comment [K1]: The obligatory date and address line for authentic letter style

Comment [K2]: Warm salutation sets the informal tone of a letter to a close friend

Comment [K3]: Fleeting references to past events help us place this in its proper chronological position

Comment [K4]: Friendly asides mimic informal letter writing style

Comment [K5]: Simplistic sentence structures – relaxed and conversational

Comment [K6]: Emotions and thoughts are concentrated on rather than events

Comment [K7]: Obvious repetitive use of the personal pronoun because this letter is about Mina

Comment [K8]: Adjectives used to indicate emotional importance of objects or people

Comment [K9]: Not telling the story from Jonathan's perspective allows what happened to remain a mystery

Comment [K10]: As Dracula is a Gothic Horror novel we have the familiar references to insanity. Notice again, however, how the story not being told from Sister Agatha's perspective continues the mystery about what happened to Jonathan

Comment [K11]: Once again – the Gothic fiction with things that are beyond human, beyond what mortal man should experience

Comment [K12]: A shared joke about how ridiculous this idea is increases the sense of informality and our personal connection with the writer

Comment [K13]: The character stops recounting the events of the recent past and starts to contemplate her immediate surroundings as she writes the letter

Comment [K14]: The letter is interrupted by an event and resumes some time later

Comment [K15]: Because we only see the world from one characters point of view some things remain mysterious and unclear – preventing us from knowing things for certain is a good way of maintaining tension and – just as Mina is forced to go the window and wonder what is going on behind her back – we are too

Comment [K16]: Because events are related reasonably chronologically we have a number of time connectives

Comment [K17]: Personal references reinforce the sense of closeness we have developed with the character

Taken from 'Dracula' by Bram Stoker