

The Fascination of Correspondence Literature: Reflections on the Little Post Office on the Mountain

Nan Li

Graduate School of Namseoul University, Cheonan, 31020, Korea

linannan11@hotmail.com

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Abstract: The Little Post Office on the Mountain is a fiction written by the Spanish writer, Angeles Donate. The novel presents us a dialogue about friendship, love, affection, homesickness and dreams that takes place on the letter paper. From “memory on the paper” to the end, the story is told in 35 chapters with multiple threads and strong inner connections. By digging into the novel, this paper tries to analyze the method in which the novel can be clearly presented and to explain the skills in which the emotion and characters are portrayed. Besides, the paper will also try to reveal the innovation of the novel to show the charm of poetry and letter literature in novels.

1. Introduction

“All love letters are absurd, or else they wouldn’t be called love letters.” The so-called “joy on paper” mentioned at the opening of the novel actually exists between the lines of these letters. “This winter is ending”. With the last line concluding the book, the story depicted in the novel lives on as a mesmerizing fairy tale - a world where the freezing north wind ceases blowing and the only things left are friendship, love, familial love, dreams and the hometown sealed under a blanket of snow. The book can be more accurately described as a film projector about loving and being loved in a dreamlike town, instead of a modern full-length novel.

1.1 Content of the Novel

The story takes place in a mountainous village called Porvenir in Madrid. Sara, the only postwoman in town, is a single mother with three children. With electronic and information technologies becoming increasingly ubiquitous in modern times, emails as a mainstream means of communication has made her work obsolete. Rosa, Sara’s neighbor, initiated a project called letter relay: “She is the postwoman of the village. Her supervisor sent her an email, telling her that they planned to transfer her to a place far away from home. The post office that has existed in Porvenir for more than one hundred years will soon be closed for a lack of employee. I wouldn’t have told you this if you cannot help Sara and our village. Then, how do you do it? It is simple, do what I am doing - writing a letter. Things like the length of the letter or quality of your writing are unimportant. Then, send your letter to another woman in the village. Share with her something about your life even if you don’t know her. Let’s work together to create a writing relay that is so long that it reaches the capital and so strong that no one there can cut it off”.

In her first letter, Rosa writes to Luisa, a friend that she hasn’t seen for 60 years. Apart from requesting her help for the replay project, she also apologizes to her, confessing about how she deceived about her secret relationship with Aweil, which forced Luisa to leave her hometown. Rosa has been witnessing the continuation of the writing relay and it is at the end of the story that she starts to realize that Luisa died almost 10 years ago. This hidden thread intertwined with love and friendship can be likened to a background music serving to set an atmosphere of the story. The music rises at the very beginning to highlight the emotions throughout the story - the village still stands as an exceptional place and people are still holding a strong, persistent mind against the grey sky. In the meantime, this intertwined thread also echoes to the ending of the story: Rosa eventually meets Luisa’s granddaughter Alma at the graveyard, who turns out to be a family of Alex. In

addition to echoing to the sentimental tone set at the opening of the story, such an ending also works as a response to the conundrum about love and friendship.

1.2 Narrative Thread

The story is told from a certain view but with different scenes. With changing settings and the focus on events, the multiple threads are woven together [1], which, however, leads readers to the main plot. The narrative thread of the novel, simply put, points towards two paralleling directions - the letter relay and the fulfillment of love. Undoubtedly, the letter relay is irrefutably the central axis of the story as all plots unfolds around it. Main characters are respectively presented through reading, writing and mailing letters. Letters are arguably a companion for these characters, whose content, either being a self-expression or a recall of life and personal emotions, functions as a manifestation of their personalities. There are 8 letters presented along the chain of writing relay. In combination with the letter that Alex writes to his deceased father Mauricio and the letter Mauricio wrote to Alex before his death, which is revealed at the end of the story, there are a total of 10 complete letters presented in the novel (see Figure 1).

There are two major narrative threads for the love theme: the love between Sara and Fernando (who uses the nickname of CASTAWAY65 when chatting with Sara online) and between Alma and Alex. The other two sub-threads, which are rather implicit and can be referred to as hidden threads, are about the love between Rosa and Aweil and between Hypatia and Thomas. Nothing is unexpected about the narrative thread of love - it's a typical process from acquaintanceship to bosom friendship to love. The two implicit narrative threads are considered here as hidden threads because of an inability to compare them to the main thread and a lack of a prototype as they are unfolded in an independent manner. If such a prototype is available, the main thread of love should have been able to support the developments towards an ultimate goal, thereby indirectly proclaiming the inevitable outcomes of the main thread. However, the hidden threads are ingeniously concealed in the story: the relationship between Rosa and Aweil is described in the first letter at the opening of the story, setting a sentimental tone for all subsequent letters. The lifelong love of Rosa spanning from her youth to her senior age, is concealed along the continuation of the entire project. However, the love between Hypatia and Thomas is concealed in a more explicit way as it appears in descriptions of everyday life - for example, they never part from each other, even in trips to food markets.

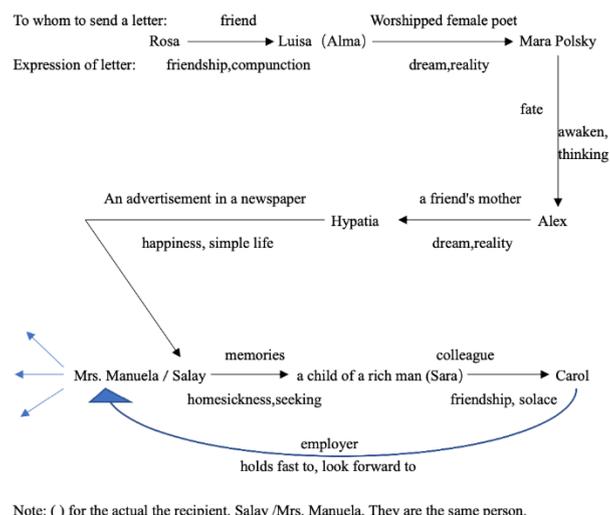


Fig.1 Interactions Conveyed by Letter Relays

2. Self-Expression of Characters within the Pervasion of Multi-Layered Emotions

2.1 Describe characters' Personalities Using Emotion

The happy ending for the love of two couples is undoubtedly the most significant emotional tone for the entire novel. In addition, narratives and sentiments about familial love, friendship, dream

and homesickness are also clearly presented. Familial love is depicted between Sara and her three children, Alma and her grandmother Luisa and between her parents, Alex and his father, Hypatia and her grandchild, and Carol and his family members in South America. Friendship is sufficiently manifested in the relationship among all villagers and almost every household. The examples in this regard include Sara's neighbors who are enthusiastically engaged in the letter relay and preparing parties; the candid conversations between Alma and Mara Polsky; and Carol's understanding of Mrs. Manuela. The motif about dream exerts the most significantly positive effect other than emotional factors, which is concentrated on the relationship between Alma and Alex. Alma is aspired to become an exceptional women poet like Mara Polsky; while Alex is committed to geographic research, dreaming of visiting all continents in the world. Alma's escape from home and the stereotyped life and work style she gives up accurately reflect her actions of pursuing dreams. Although Alex fails to leave the village due to the necessity to take care of his severely sick father and other constraints of life, he nevertheless puts tremendous effort in familiarizing himself with maps, reading books and frequently visiting libraries, which are also the best examples in terms of dream chasing. Undoubtedly, the passion of these young people in their dreams also dictates the inevitability of their love. The sentiment of homesickness presented in the novel allows readers to perceive a spiritual salvation attached to the human longingness for home. Alma's arrival may not be driven by her homesickness but by an urge to escape from the reality and the confusion about her dreams. However, a prelude highlighting a destined ending has been provided at the very beginning of the story. Mara Polsky leads a solitary life that gives his soul somewhere to cling to; Salay eventually returns to her home after twists and turns following her divorce - as a child of a rich man in South America, she generously plants tropical palm trees in her courtyard enclosed by high walls in Europe. Carol's homesickness, originating from his presence in a foreign country, is manifested by his nostalgic feelings about home at a remote corner of the world, as well as by the money and mails he sends home.

Arguably, every letter and every individual depicted in the novel have one or multiple emotions to be expressed in letters or incidents. Each emotion is conveyed through the letters personally written by these characters, narrated to the recipients and us as readers. In the meantime, the author does not choose a path to directly or metaphorically depicting character images, which are instead revealed through the characters' self-expressions and descriptions of different scenes. By combining emotion with self-expression, the narrative technique serves as an important way to reveal character images in the book, a proof of the author's outstanding writing skill.

2.2 Create an Emotional Atmosphere with Scene Description

Apart from the rich and intertwined emotions and self-expressions, the textual descriptions of the scenes and images also provides a sense as if they are captured by camera lenses. For example, in the chapter of *The Transformation of the Universe*, "She popped her head out from the French window of the living room. It was still raining heavily outside. The road at the opposite direction of house was somewhat congested. She immediately recognized the postal car with alternating colors of blue and yellow. It was parked alongside a deep red sedan, whose door at the driver's side was open. Not far in the front was a bicycle laying on the ground. It seemed there were two people quarreling furiously, but she could not clearly see what they look like due to the heavy rain. There was another man trying to separate them." In the chapter titled *Name List*, Alma goes to Alex's home, "there are two framed scenery paintings on the chief wall, which are not difficult for her to recognize what they are... A large table with dried flowers placed at the center attracted her attention. The table was placed along the wall, a sign showing that it was not frequently used... A short table lies across the sofa, where a few photo frames scattered. In the first photo frame are two boys dressed in shorts and carrying fishing pods. She immediately recognized that it was Alex - his golden hair, green eyes and emaciated body. The one beside him should be his brother, who looks just like him but stronger. She gazed at another photo frame, where a black and white photo depicts a bunch of people surrounding a newlywed couple. Alma noticed the face of Mauricio when he was young...". In the chapter of *Living Poets Club*, Alma walks towards the woman poet, "she was

dressed a black gown long enough to reach her feet, both of which were only covered with a pair of socks, with each toe bearing a different color. Around her neck were many pearls, some of which were extremely special and looked like flattened silver hands, which reminded her of the bells hanging around the necks of livestock. Two pencils protruded rather incongruously from her ragged grey hair, as if they were a pair of Chinese chopsticks and even a pen. What on earth is she doing? Going to a masquerade?" The images depicted by the author not only provoke imagination and a sense of time travel through lens-like descriptions, but they also depict a scene of how characters are engaged in the events, allowing us to perceive the inner feelings of these characters from afar.

3. Poetry and Correspondence Literature: the Indelibility of Literature and Knowledge

Poetry, as one of the most important forms of literary works, almost runs through every chapter of the book along with other literary genres like prose and play. Poetry, as an art of language, is used for expression and communication. Therefore, poetry also can be used by the author to express emotion and perspectives and guide the readers to make right emotion judgment [2]. Reading the novel allows us to gain an impression of reading and familiarizing with multiple literary works, for instance, through Alex's interests and dreams we are able to see Ferdinand Magellan's global expedition, the "head waters of the Nile", and a South American village called "Porvenir" that actually exists in Chile. The quantity and depth of knowledge is irrelevant as long as it can arouse your desire and quest for more knowledge. Fiction is a kind of literary genre. And today's fictions incorporate various artistic methods of various art categories. As a result, the form of poetry and prose, etc. are often can be seen in a fiction[3]. In this novel, various literary genres are integrated to create a special way to explain the story.

In the chapter titled Waiting for Margo, the author demonstrates multiple master writers through Alma's perspective, "Cervantes, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, Neruda, Sanit-Exupery, Chekhov, Kafka, Borges, Niloty Bronte and Louisa May Alcott, as if these writers can get along harmoniously regardless their ages, nationalities or genders." In the meantime, the author also tries to convey his views about his own desire to pursue and connect knowledge through Alma's words, "if only the world were a giant library, where westerners and easterners, the young and the old peacefully lived there". From Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, Paul Oster's *Casual Music*, Asolin's *Will*, Charles Baudelaire's *The Flower of Evil*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Kafka's *Transfiguration*, Gabriel Celaya's *Iberian Ode*, to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*...all these textual descriptions about the protagonist's preferences and images are sufficient enough to show that the author's knowledge pursuit through reading and thinking widely.

The letter allows the author to show his true temperament, thought and literary preference and perspectives so as to mirror the author's focus on achieving the beauty of literary form and a free expression of emotions [4]. The letters appearing in the novel transform from their initial function as regular carriers of texts towards the concept of correspondence literature in the second half of the story. However, the prelude towards the proposal of correspondence literature is also provided by the occasional adoption of master writer's content, which further places a hidden stroke for the creation of the Letter Club at the end of the story. Citations of literary works are everywhere in the book, which function as a depiction of the two pairs of lovers and the author's own expression on knowledge. In particular, the employment of poetry reaches its peak in the 39 love letters written by Fernando to Sara. Again, it is another proof of the author's wide reading and literary attainment, which not only enhances the quality of the entire novel, but also strengthens the power of words.

"I love you for the sake of loving you, not for being loved, because there is nothing that makes me happier than just looking at you. George Sang. "

"In one kiss, you will know everything I have kept silent. Pablo Neruda".

"And when my voice is silent in death, my song will speak in your living heart. Rabindranath Tagore"

"One is in love when one realizes that the other person is unique. Jorge Luis Borges"

"Love comforeth like sunshine after rain. William Shakespeare"

"That which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil. Nietzsche"

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched...but just felt in the heart. Hellen Keller”

4. Conclusion

Throughout the novel, letters are used to open up the timeline of the narrative, connects the storylines and prompts the occurrence of events; it is also through characters’ writing of letters that their images are successfully portrayed. These are the most distinct characteristics for novels utilizing correspondences as a narrative tool. In addition, poetry and literature run through the entire novel to improve the readability of seemingly regular actions of writing, mailing and reading letters, endowing them with a literary core so that these letters are more worthwhile to read. Despite massive publications of novels, proses or essays comprised of collections of letters, this novel nevertheless presents a novel way to connect the narrative approach of letters with character depiction, emotional atonement and literary expression, which allows readers to perceive a more delicate and more intimate genre of novels.

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