

Narrative Strategies in the Fictive Diary:

Reader-Response Theory and the Grossmiths' *The Diary of a Nobody*

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The fictive diary is a particular type of first-person narrative about imaginary events. It is congruent with other closely related literary forms such as fictive *journaux intimes* and fictive autobiographies or memoirs (eg. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jane Eyre*) or first- or third-person narratives which have a diary component (eg. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). The fictive diary has a long tradition: the realistic novel itself was, in part, born out of texts which were initially offered as 'real' memoirs. For example, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) was first offered as the genuine diary-memoir of one 'H F,' a Whitechapel saddler, of the events of the Great Plague of 1664-5. It was not discerned to be fiction until some eighty years later.¹ Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), or at least the first volume, is mostly told in the form of a letter-journal, and therefore fits the definition also.²

In their purest form, fictive diaries have some distinctively unique properties. Among them might be mentioned: discrete entries linked to a calendar and presented in temporal sequence; an impression of immediacy created by a minimal gap between event and narration; a lack of retrospective narratorial intrusion; and a maximising of documentary illusion even to the point of including apparently 'blank' entries, such as diarist Roquentin's famous summary of one day, in J-P Sartre's *Nausea* (1938): 'Nothing. Existed.'³

Even if we adopt the narrowest formal definition, the fictive diary has long been a popular form in European literature: one list, by no means comprehensive, gives about 250 examples, dating from the mid-17th century to the present. Curiously, examples in English are less common.

It is useful to distinguish further between the *pseudo-diary* and the *mock-diary*. In the case of the first, every attempt is made to present the fiction as a real diary, ostensibly written by the protagonist, and sometimes equipped with an elaborate editorial frame to reinforce its authenticity. In most realist fiction, certainly that of the Victorian era, the narrator may well address the implied reader directly, without ambiguity. (Although there are many exceptions: in, say, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, the narrator is just as much a fictional construct, a character, as any of the others.) In the pseudo-diary there is little or no 'gap' between the diarist-narrator and the reader. For example, Sartre's *Nausea* is a parody of conventional diary novels to some extent, but what is ironised is the mimetic ambitions of the novel, not the diarist himself. On the contrary, the diarist, Roquentin, has to be accepted as honest and incapable of self-deception. Since he articulates Sartre's own philosophy, existentialism, there would be little point to him if he were not a mouthpiece of the author, speaking to the philosophically astute reader. Indeed, one such reader has called him a 'hero of insight'.⁴

¹ Lay, 37.

² To be exact, four-fifths of the first volume of *Pamela* is a letter journal. The second volume is usually defined as a 'correspondence novel' (See Abbott, 208).

³ Sartre, 140.

⁴ Abbott, 113.

Matters are very different in the *mock-diary*. Here both the diarist and the diary form itself are handled ironically. The illusion of authenticity is thin. Mock-diaries are intrinsically humorous in tone and always have an unreliable diarist-narrator.

This paper argues that the English mock-diary emerged definitively in the late-Victorian years, when a flood of pompous, self-regarding diaries and memoirs finally drew the attention of satirists. The best and most enduring example – it has never been out of print – is *The Diary of a Nobody* (1888-9; 1892), by the brothers Grossmith. Apart from being arguably the first fully-realised fictive diary of any type in English, the *Diary* has had a strong influence for more than a century not only on 'suburban' fiction generally, but on other popular mock-diaries, from Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) to Sue Townsend's *Adrian Mole* series (1982-2004) and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996). All these authors have paid public tribute to it, and have, implicitly, built on Mr Pooter's defensive opening statement: 'I fail to see – because I do not happen to be a "Somebody" – why my diary should not be interesting.'

Further, it will be argued that the comic technique of *The Diary of a Nobody* is much more sophisticated than it appears at first. Like all the mock-diaries which have descended from it, the *Diary* works on several narrative levels which, in the convenient terminology of reader-response literary theory, can be called the province of the *implied author*, the *narrator*, the *narratee* and the *implied reader*. The relevance of each of these will be discussed. Of particular interest is that entity which stands between the narrator and implied reader: the narratee, who is silent in the text yet exists as an ever-sympathetic 'ear' into which the diarist is speaking.

This narratee can be the objectified self of the diarist or it can be the physical diary itself – the entity sometimes cosily addressed (though not, in fact, by Mr Pooter) as 'Dear Diary'. The humour depends on a detectable gap being maintained between the implied reader – that is, the one who is presumed capable of deciphering the narrator's pomposities and self-deceptions – and what has been called the 'specifically acquiescent' narratee.⁵ What makes for unique comedy in the *Diary* is the particular way in which Pooter recollects and represents his painful experiences, for the ear of his unheard narratee.

This paper will go on to examine three episodes in the *Diary* whose comic effect can best be understood in terms of the process of transcription and transmission from implied author, to narrator, to narratee, to implied reader. It will also touch on an interesting consequence of the interposition of a narratee, first noticed by Lubbock, which applies to all mock-diaries: their comedy is peculiarly resistant to being dramatised or read aloud. An audible reader can hardly refrain from leaning heavily on phrases like 'imagine my horror' or 'felt quite miserable,' yet these phrases are intended for the ear of the narratee, not the (presumed) less-than-sympathetic implied reader/listener. Unless handled carefully it distorts the effect of having the experience filtered through Pooter's complacent sensibility. Mock-diary humour works best, as Lubbock puts it, in 'the silence of the page.'⁶

⁵ By Cobley in his brief but cogent discussion of the *Diary's* narrative tactics.

⁶ Lubbock, 26.

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