



ISSN: 1994-4217 (Print) 2518-5586(online)

Journal of College of Education

Available online at: <https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq>Asst.Lect. Umniyah
Mohammed JasimWasit University /
College of Fine Arts

Email:

Umniyahmj@uowasit.edu.iq

Keywords:

Epistolary ,
Surveillance , Power,
Voice , Identity

Article info

Article history:

Received 9.Sep.2025

Accepted 1.Dec.2025

Published 25.Febr.2026



Epistolary Surveillance: Power in "Jean Webster's Daddy -Long- Legs"

A B S T R A C T

This research takes the epistolary form of Jean Webster's Daddy-Long-Legs published in 1912 as a lens through which to examine the novel's interplay of power. While it has often been asserted that the novel's letters serve as unintended gifts of self-revelation to Judy's benefactor, "Javis Pendleton", whose paternalistic –unclear-objectification is nonetheless resisted by Judy. The argument of this research is that the letter-writing mode functions doubly, both as a vehicle for Judy's agency and as an instrument of social as well as institutional surveillance and control. Central to the inquiry is the tension between Judy's personal emancipation and the disciplinary overtures of her guardian, which manifest the structure of epistolary surveillance by demanding her letters as the conditions for his material support. The letters function as both a capitalistic self-creation for Judy, which presents a fluctuating tension between power and powerlessness, places readers close to, rather than at a distance from, an evolving subjectivity, and insistently foregrounds the performative process of self-fashioning for an absent yet assumed audience. In placing "Daddy Long Legs" within the social and literary conditions related to early twentieth-century American literature, the research includes critiques of epistolary style within the structure of women's writing and expository influence.

© 2026 EDUJ, College of Education for Human Science, Wasit University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol62.Iss2.4689>

المراقبة الرسائلية: السلطة في رواية "صاحب الظل الطويل لجين وبستر"

م.م. أمنية محمد جاسم محمد الجاسم
جامعة واسط / كلية الفنون الجميلة

المخلص

يتخذ هذا البحث الشكل الرسائلية لرواية صاحب الظل الطويل للكاتبة جين وبستر التي نشرت في عام ١٩١٢، كمنظار لدراسة تفاعل السلطة في الرواية. وبينما يُزعم غالباً أن رسائل الرواية تُمثل هدايا غير مقصودة للكشف عن الذات لراعي جودي، "جافيس بندلتون"، حيث اصرت جودي على منح الطابع الأبوي - غير الواضح -، فإن حجة هذا البحث هي أن أسلوب كتابة الرسائل يؤدي وظيفته بشكل مزدوج، كوسيلة لفاعلية جودي وأداة للمراقبة والتحكم الاجتماعي والمؤسسي ويكمن جوهر البحث في التوتر بين تحرر جودي الشخصي ومبادرات ولي أمرها التأديبية، والتي تُبرز بنية المراقبة الرسائلية من خلال المطالبة برسائلها كشرط لدعمه المادي. تُمثل الرسائل لجودي عملية خلقٍ رأسماليٍّ للذات، تُمثل توتراً متقلّباً بين القوة والعجز، وتقرب القراء من ذاتية متطورة، بدلاً من أن تبعدهم عنها، وتُبرز بإصرارٍ العملية الأدائية لتشكيل الذات لجمهورٍ غائبٍ ولكنه مُفترض. بوضع "صاحب الظل الطويل" ضمن الظروف الاجتماعية والأدبية المتعلقة بالأدب الأمريكي في أوائل القرن العشرين، حيث يتضمن البحث انتقادات للأسلوب الرسائلية ضمن بنية الكتابة والتأثير التفسيري النسوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرسائلية، المراقبة، السلطة، الصوت الروائي، الهوية.

1. Introduction

In the 1900s some women writers started to option the innovation of feminine agency, so because of that the concentration of some writers was mostly on the epistolary novel. This is perhaps why *Jean Webster's 1912 Daddy-Long-Legs* has dominated popular interest almost a century after it was first published. Most readers come to the text expecting a young adult romance, and their expectations are largely fulfilled as they enjoy the details of Judy's life and her education. Enjoyment, however, often obscures the mechanisms of discipline that structures the novel. The seemingly one-dimensional structure of the epistolary novel, in fact, is to create a limited laboratory through which to explore the dynamics of surveillance.

The novel employed a familiar concept to convey the strategies in which institutional foundations classify and take control of independent individualism. Judy's letters not only suggest her inner educational development, but are the well-defined setting of her declaration towards resistance and then acceptance of what accepted from her as an orphan in an unjust system. This gaze, as a means of authoritarianism, is climactically became evident as a way of self-examination.

The epistolary novel has a long history in literature, a history that generates direct and immediate experiences. From *Fielding's Pamela in the early 18th century to Walker's 1980's The Color Purple*, such novels often feature disregarded protagonists—most notably women—who, through the act of writing itself, create a narrative that centers around them.

The letter evolves into an instrument for confidentiality, revelation, and confession. Yet this intimacy is loaded with risks, as is the genuine power of narrative. Orphan Jerusha Abbott receives financial support for her education on the arrangement that she sends monthly letters to the mysterious "Mr. Smith," whom she calls "Daddy Long Legs", she neither expects nor allowed any response.

"These letters will be addressed to Mr. John Smith and will be sent in care of the secretary. ... He will never answer your letters, nor in the slightest particular take any notice of them. ... These monthly letters are absolutely obligatory on your part; they are the only payment that Mr. Smith requires, so you must be as punctilious in sending them as though it were a bill that you were paying." (Jean Webster, 1912, P. 15).

The situation is arranged for a one-sided monologic penning. From the start, Judy engages in an unequal and privileged power relationship. She is mostly on display and under surveillance. Her letters, reports to unknown benefactor, are always examined, and considered confirmation of her obedience with the terms she was given. Therefore, these "educational correspondence" is a form of obligation and control.

Building on Foucault's concept of total surveillance and its broader implications, the term surveillance is used in this paper to mean something more insidious than mere observation; surveillance is a discipline. Just like an inmate of the Panopticon, Judy is keenly aware of the omniscient role of her guardian. This observation even if it is hidden; Judy realizes that every action, every bad exam mark, every temperament is being watched from the other side. Therefore, the individuality of her narrative voice is molded and shaped in accordance to what they see as appropriate.

This powerful dynamic is further reinforced by the early twentieth-century American context in which the novel is set. This period was marked by progressive reform movements that particularly targeted immigrants, the working poor, and women in boarding houses, orphanages, schools, and universities, If individuals are not from a certain class in society, and have certain qualities, they are marginalized, so Judy must be refined into a product that is acceptable even if she had to give up own her singularity by the letters which act as a straightforward transaction; money is exchanged for education and a favorable woman is molded. The requirements that were demanded from her at the beginning of the novel systematically altered her view and knowledge her reality. The letters become a means of asserting herself through her independent and clear relationship with her benefactor. The dominant narrative and practices imposed by ubiquitous forces shaping her freedoms, spaces, and opportunities.

2.Literature Review

The epistolary novel *Daddy-Long-Legs*, has been a focus of critical attention primarily due to its textual form. The conceptual and narrative benefits of epistolary novels allow not only a closer analysis of point of view but also of subjectivity, agency, and voice. Baker states that the epistolary form provides a "traditional and powerful way of framing individuality and specifically women's individuality in the face of social and institutional forces" (2010, p. 22).

In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, written letters of the character Judy explore and express what constitutes her individuality; however, at the same time, there is a power imbalance due to the rich benefactor, whose identity remains disguised throughout the novel. "Dear Daddy-Long-Legs, you never answered my question and it was very important. ARE YOU BALD?" (Webster, 1912, P. 45). Thus, the letters serve the dual purpose of self-expression while at the same time being monitored and interrogated. Baker also comments that "the epistolary novel breaks down the distance between the author and the reader offered by the traditional, omniscient, third-person narrator; letters often are instruments of individual and social control in early twentieth-century fiction" (2010, p. 28).

Critical studies of epistolary literature tend to rely on the dynamic of empowerment against control. Ferguson claims that "letters in various capacities create narratives that reflect, challenge, or reinforce social norms; they also represent spaces where characters and authors explore private thoughts" (2012, p. 47). In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, the beneficiary of Judy uses his power and the letter writing system to decide what kind of education she should receive, and how she should behave, thus tapping into the Foucauldian idea of disciplinary tracking: "Visibility is a trap; it is the first step towards a relationship of power that is established between a whole system of objects and the one who observes them" (1977, p. 187). Yet at the same time Judy makes use of the epistolary material to articulate desires, critique social norms and expectations, and express agency in a constricting world.

"Dear Daddy-Long-Legs, I've changed my name. I'm still "Jerusha" in the catalogue, but I'm "Judy" every place else. It's sort of too bad, isn't it, to have to give yourself the only pet name you ever had?" (Webster, 1912, P. 33).

Feminist literary criticism also contributes to the critical discourse on Webster's text. Smith argues that "the letters describe and convey the almost invisible but necessary process through which a controlled and manipulated female consciousness may struggle towards aware subjectivity" (2015, p. 81). The narrative has been described as "flirting with freedom in carefully negotiated spaces" where characters contemplate "ways in which women may write themselves into being through socially inflected texts" and explains that Judy's "playfulness, self-reflection, and determinate circularity become a form of covert resistance to institutional control" (2015, p. 84). The letters as the first-person voice come to the fore and reflect a conscious, critical, literate, feminist self-emerging from contemporary developmental discourse.

"Did I ever tell you about the election? It happened three weeks ago, but so fast do we live, that three weeks is ancient history. Sallie was elected, and we had a torchlight parade with transparencies saying, "McBride Forever," and a band consisting of fourteen pieces (three mouth organs and eleven combs). We're very important persons now in "258." Julia and I come in for a great deal of reflected glory. It's quite a social strain to be living in the same house with a president." (Webster, 1912, P. 113).

Moreover, many academics address the issue of how Webster's text reflects the time period it was written in and its purpose. The text was published in the early 1900s at a time when "education for women was beginning to be more widely regarded as a plus in the mainstream social context" (Johnson, 2008, p. 56).

Daddy-Long-Legs, show education being used superficially as part of a journey for personal development without revealing the structures or hierarchies that impede its progress; the formal epistolary narrative offers greater insight. Johnson elaborates that, "literature produced at the time of these historical events provides insight into the changing roles and boundaries of the educated woman in the early twentieth-century American context" (2008, p. 59).

Narrative theory has also considered the first-person voice in the novel. Harris explains that "the first-person-letter format allows an exact mapping of the development of consciousness, of thought processes, emotions, and opinions" (2013, p. 92). The letters also question the tension between visibility and invisibility, where "Judy writes her letters firmly believing that they will be read and understood but at the same time she writes them under the scrutiny of the 'man behind the curtain' in constant elevation and distortion," resulting in an interesting textual tension between empowerment, accuracy, and control, therefore, the letters and first-person textual form can serve both as a text and object comment and can manipulate the social constraints and free surfaces of a woman's evolving sense of self. This study builds on existing critical scholarship but aims to interrogate specifically how the epistolary novel operates on a narrative level and the different ways that power(discourse) and social structures regulate and control female voices and subjectivity.

3.Theoretical Framework

The theoretical research utilized in the present study is based on feminism literary criticism, narrative theory, and Foucauldian concepts of surveillance, all of which offer a multidimensional perspective in the analysis of epistolary literature in the work *Daddy-Long-Legs* by Jean Webster. The combination of these theoretical orientations allows a thorough appreciation of the role that power, voice and female subjectivity play in the novel in relation to the letter-form narrative throughout.

Feminist literary criticism guides this study in particular, since it focuses on the deconstruction of gendered power structures and the construction of female identity via negotiations with an existing patriarchal world. Showalter argued that, "feminist criticism seeks to uncover the ways in which literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges the social and cultural positions of women." (1985, p. 21). In the novel, *Daddy-Long-Legs*, the letters of the main character Judy have multiple levels: they are treated as a personal diary and means of defining her independence and the authority of her mysterious patron. In light of this, Smith notes that "the epistolary form allows women to claim narrative authority while remaining within socially prescribed boundaries," (2015, p. 82) Through the use of feminist theory, this study questions how Judy develops her identity, agency, and how she resists social demands via her letters.

Narrative theory offers another critical perspective, and especially in studying the use of narrative voice and narrative perspective in epistolary novels. Genette argues that "the narrator's position and degree of knowledge significantly affect the reader's engagement with the text and the interpretation of character subjectivity." (1980, p. 189). The narration in *Daddy-Long-Legs* adopts a letter format and the first-person point of view; it makes readers enter the world of Judy and feel close to her. Harris emphasizes that "epistolary narration allows readers to witness the protagonist's evolving self-awareness, while simultaneously presenting the social gaze of the absent correspondent." (2013, p. 94). This duality reflects the ambivalence between intimate expression and external control and so that is why this paper will focus on the relationship between voice and surveillance.

The mechanisms of power that are present in the epistolary form of the novel can be discussed within the framework of Foucauldian theory of surveillance. Foucault asserts that "visibility is a trap; the observed individual is caught in a power network," (1977, p. 187), highlighting how monitoring shapes behavior and self-perception. The anonymous benefactor in "*Daddy-Long-Legs*" also plays the role of a panoptic figure, as it has complete control of the life and education of Judy, through the letters. According to Ferguson, who explains that "literary surveillance operates by creating a sense of observation that regulates characters' actions while leaving them seemingly autonomous." (2012, p. 48). This emphasizes how the letter-writing methods lay out a sense of indebtedness and control, and the way Judy is placed in the gaze of power.

Building around the beliefs of independent self-formation Judy thought that the letters were a method of expressing her true self and building her independent identity, little did she know, her identity was already structured by her surroundings and she was merely reflecting what society forced on her as an orphan, according to Bhabha "identity is constructed through negotiation with cultural, social, and institutional forces." (1994, p. 65). The framework suggests that epistolary style of writing not only explores the plot but rather reads into inquiries into feminine identity, voice agency and surveillance.

4. Discussion

The research analyzes *Jean Webster's Daddy-Long-Legs* through the scrutinizing of epistolary technique of writing as well as surveillance. It provides a comprehensive discussion of the letter-writing approach as a site for interrogating issues of subjectivity, voice, and the ethical ambiguities of the protagonist Jerusha Abbott and her unnamed benefactor. Using feminist literary criticism, narrative theory, and scholarship on Foucauldian surveillance, the novel is situated within a wider social, cultural, and literary framework.

4.1. The Epistolary Structure as a mean of Expression and Agency

The epistolary structure of "Daddy-Long-Legs" supports Judy with a unique space in order for her to which to express her thoughts, feelings, and aspirations.

"Sallie and I decided last spring that we should like to room together, and Julia made up her mind to stay with Sallie—why, I can't imagine, for they are not a bit alike; but the Pendletons are naturally conservative and inimical (fine word!) to change. Anyway, here we are. Think of Jerusha Abbott, late of the John Grier Home for Orphans, rooming with a Pendleton. This is a democratic country." (Webster, 1912, P. 109).

Letters naturally enable personal exchange of the voice and help to avoid the more popular third person narrative. Baker claims that "letters in early twentieth century novels chart a dialogic space in which the character negotiates their own personal subjectivity as they write to an external or distant social authority." (2010, p.22) It is in the negotiations that Judy's letters reflect this process in her thinking about education, morality and personal development. Feminist critics argue that epistolary texts grant women to generate their presence within literature. Smith explains that "the epistolary form affords female characters a sense of narrative authority, even within social constraints"(2015, p. 83). Judy's authority mirrors the manner in which her apprehension and determination are adapting. Her letters act as a gateway of self-declaration, also as a means of conniving her social status as if she is proving to herself before others that she has a place in this world. Smith says that "Humor in the form of letters allows women to speak opposition of recognized power without confrontation."(2015, p. 85). She uses humor to position herself in the important considerations of her surroundings.

4.2 Surveillance and Power Relationships

Foucault explains in his surveillance theory that: "Visibility is a trap; the observed individual is caught in a power network." (1977, p. 187), so even if "Daddy-Long-Legs" is absent from the scene, _"Sir: You never answer any questions; you never show the slightest interest in anything I do. You are probably the horriddest one of all those horrid Trustees, and the reason you are educating me is, not because you care a bit about me, but from a sense of Duty. " (Webster, 1912, P. 67); his authority is strongly present by supporting her living as well as her education and by his observation to her morality through the letters. Ferguson argues that:" Literary surveillance works by creating a sense of observation that has characters behave within it, but with the characters seemingly acting involuntarily on their own." (2012, p. 48). Throughout the novel, seemingly senses the observation upon her behaviors and conduct. Therefore, her letters alter and refined.

Her conscious understanding of being observed critically enhances her self-restraining, ethical notion, and the comprehension of her true predicaments." Please forget about that dreadful letter I sent you last week—I was feeling terribly lonely and miserable and sore-throaty the night I wrote." (Webster, 1912, P. 67).

Surveillance in "Daddy Long Legs" has an additional aspect: a precautional insight and guiding obligation. The fact that Judy was given an education and attained acceptance to social status with strict moral requirements is due to the action of *Daddy Long Legs*.

4.3 Negotiation of Female Subjectivity

The central theme of the novel is that Judy's attempt to negotiate feminine subjectivity in a patriarchal society, "I don't suppose you understand in the least what I am trying to say. A person important enough to be a Trustee can't appreciate the feelings of a person unimportant enough to be a foundling." (Webster, 1912, P. 108). Writing the letters allows the heroine to reconsider who she is, what she wants and how she stands for entertainment. Showalter states that, "feminist criticism seeks to explore how women construct an identity within the cultural conditions of literature, which reveal gendered power relations." (1985, p. 21). Judy's letters show a keen awareness of what society expects from her, but they also constitute an opportunity for Judy to create her own definition. As Ekhlash Rahi Mashkour explains "The concept of Other is resulted from the false social criterion that divides human beings in to two groups, appreciating the life standard, values, manners, beliefs of the powerful dominant group and degrading and despising the norms of the less fortunate one."(2025, p.1295). Thus she examines her schooling, her impressions of society, and her aspirations, so there is a tension between feeling exposed and being out of sight. Harris argues that "the epistolary narrator is both visible and hidden, providing the main character with means for negotiating between public expectations and private self-expression." (2013, p. 95). Judy appropriates this gaze; she solicits and coerces her desires as she reconciles her dreams and desires with the intentions of her benefactor. As Ahmed Ali Fayyadh elaborates "The social standards of the 1930s judged women by the ability to become wives who would produce offspring."(2025, p.511).

5. Conclusion

Judy's inward reflections on higher education, social climbing, gender norms, ambition and independence marks these expected structures and shapes them into something new. Judy's existence and female development is, however, also thematically rooted in the early twentieth-century American development of the social hierarchy and other institutions that points to a more systemic interpretation of her subjectivity criticism where agency is rooted within the social hierarchy of surveillance, social capital, gender, and authority. The epistolary structure offered the power of literacy, but it places her agency in a high degree of narrative authority at the mercy of surveillance.

The epistolary writing reinforces this research's methodology of feminine approach of recognition and independence, which portrays a crucial role both in permitting a critical external perspective for the readers and entitling Judy to grasp authority, gender, and social flexibility in a witty manner. The novel is an inspection of the power of the epistolary form and the shifting nature of structures, when it comes to voice, authority, independence, and first-person perspectives that embodied much of the early twentieth-century cultural landscape in relation to Judy's subjectivity.

References

- Baker, L. (2010). *Letters and narrative authority in early twentieth-century novels*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Fayyadh, A. (2025). The Struggle Between Despair and Hope: A Woman and Her Family's Journey Through the Turbulent Winds of the Dust Bowl Era in the Novel *The Four Winds*. *Journal of College of Education*.
- DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol60.Iss1.4298>
- Ferguson, M. (2012). Epistolary forms and social oversight. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 28(3), 45-62.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harris, R. (2013). *Narrative voice in epistolary fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, P. (2008). *Women, education, and society in early twentieth-century America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mashkoor, E. (2025). Female Psychic Disintegration in the Post-colonial context of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). *Journal of College of Education*.
- DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss3.1059>
- Showalter, E. (1985). *The female tradition: Feminist criticism in the twentieth century*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Smith, A. (2015). Feminist readings of Jean Webster's novels. *Feminist Literary Studies*, 12(2), 78-96.
- Webster, J. (1912). *Daddy-Long-Legs*. New York: The Century Company.