

Unveiling the Narrative Tapestry: A Deeper Look into 'Daddy-Long-Legs' by Jean Webster

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Abstract

This paper examines Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912) by applying narrative theory to demonstrate how the epistolary form enables the protagonist, Jerusha Abbott, to construct her identity and assert her agency. By employing Gérard Genette's notion of focalisation, which highlights the movements that occur between the voice of the narrator and the voice of the focaliser, alongside Janet Altman's model of the epistolary as a terrain of voices in dialogue with one another, the analysis shows that Jerusha's letters transform from letters of controlled performativity to expressions of her voice. Genette's model of narrative discourse, particularly his typology of temporal ellipses and internal focalization, is revealed through omissions in Jerusha's correspondence, providing evidence of her increasing freedom from her benefactor's oversight. Altman's emphasis on the "double-directed" nature of letters—simultaneously friendly and performative—highlights Jerusha's strategic use of the epistolary form to negotiate power and maintain her identity. While previous studies often approached this novel from a coming-of-age perspective, this study fills a significant gap by placing its experimental narrative form at the forefront of its thematic relevance. Key findings indicate that Jerusha's early, limited focalisation constrains readers' access to her mind. Meanwhile, her growing control over pacing and dialogic address subverts patriarchal authority, allowing her to use letters as a means of self-discovery. The paper contributes to narrative theory by positioning *Daddy-Long-Legs* as a case study demonstrating how the epistolary form can destabilise hierarchical relationships through structural choices alone.

Keywords: Epistolary novel, Gérard Genette, narrative focalisation, dialogic space, Daddy's Long Legs

إزاحة الستار عن السرد الروائي: رؤية متعمقة حول قصة ويبستر صاحب الظل الطويل

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية رواية "صاحب الظل الطويل" للكاتبة جين ويبستر، من خلال تطبيق النظرية السردية؛ بهدف الكشف عن كيف يُمكن الشكل الرسائي بطل الرواية جيروشا أبوت من بناء هويتها وتأكيد قوتها الذاتية. وتعتمد الدراسة على مفهوم التمرکز عند جيرار جينيت، الذي يُسلط الضوء على التناوب بين صوت الراوي وصوت المُركّز، بالإضافة إلى نظرية جانيت ألتمان حول السرد الرسائي بوصفه فضاءً تتفاعل فيه الأصوات المتعددة. يكشف التحليل أن رسائل جيروشا تتحول تدريجياً من أسلوب تمثيلي مُقنّن إلى خطاب تعبير يعبّر عن صوتها الشخصي. ويتجلى نموذج جينيت للخطاب السرد، لاسيما من خلال تقنيّتي الحذف الزمني والتمرکز الداخلي، في إشارة حذف التفاصيل ضمن مراسلاتها إلى تحررها المتزايد من رقابة راعيها. كما يُبرز تركيز ألتمان على الطبيعة "المزدوجة" للرسائل (الودية والرسمية معاً) الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للشكل الرسائي كأداة للتفاوض حول السلطة والتعبير عن الهوية. في حين ركزت الدراسات السابقة على تصنيف الرواية بوصفها رواية بلوغ، فإن هذه الدراسة تُقدّم مقارنة جديدة عبر تحليل قالبها السرد التجريبي، مُحققةً بذلك إضافة نوعية للمجال النقدي. وتكشف النتائج الرئيسية أن التمرکز المحدود لجيروشا في بداية الرواية يقيد انكشاف وعيها أمام القارئ، بينما تؤدي سيطرتها المتعاطمة على إيقاع السرد والخطاب الحوار إلى تفويض السلطة الأبوية، ما يمكنها من توظيف الرسائل كوسيلة للابتكار الذاتي. تُسهم الورقة أيضاً في تطوير نظرية السرد من خلال تقديم "صاحب الظل الطويل" كحالة دراسة

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معلومات البحث

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تُظهر كيف يمكن للشكل الكتابي أن يُخلخل العلاقات الهرمية عبر بنية الرواية نفسها، دون الاعتماد على المحتوى فحسب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرواية الرسالية، جيرارد جينيت، التمرکز السردی، الفضاء الحواری، صاحب الظل الطویل

Introduction

Jean Webster wrote and published *Daddy-Long-Legs* in 1912, which remains a compelling and treasured piece of turn-of-the-century American literature, as well as a coming-of-age story with strong high school credentials. It also explores the epistolary form and novelistic themes, including identity, agency, and social critique. Earlier studies have tended to treat the novel primarily as a young adult narrative or as a sentimental tale of an orphan's rise to success. In contrast, the current paper aims to centre its playful narrative on thematic relevance, addressing an unfortunate gap between analysis and material contribution to existing literature. Employing a qualitative, text-based approach, this study investigates narrative theory and its application to Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912). The central aim is to illustrate how the novel's epistolary form allows the protagonist, Jerusha Abbott, to establish her subjectivity and gain agency within the patriarchal structure of early 20th-century America.

Drawing on Genette's theories of narrative discourse, especially his ideas about focalisation and temporal ellipses, alongside Altman's model of the epistolary as a dynamic space for dialogic interaction, this work reveals the layered texture of Webster's narrative. It demonstrates how the form enables Jerusha Abbott, the protagonist, to form and assert her narrative and position within a patriarchal structure. The novel is told entirely through letters that Jerusha writes to her anonymous benefactor, making it an ideal vantage

point from which to observe the production of subjectivity. As Gérard Genette (1980) explains in *Narrative Discourse*, the distinction between “who speaks” (the narrator) and “who sees” (the focalizer) is essential for understanding how narratives are filtered through individual consciousness (Genette 1980, p. 112). Jerusha serves as both the daughter and the main character; her letters are the only medium through which the story is communicated, resulting in a sense of immediacy and intimacy regarding Jerusha's trials and tribulations as she evolves as a character. In this negotiation, Jerusha's initial constrained focalization, shaped by her orphan status and her training to express gratitude, eventually broadens as she receives an education and gains self-awareness.

This study, moreover, recognises the historical and cultural context of *Daddy-Long-Legs*. Written at a time of upheaval and change in America, amidst the rapid industrial revolution, urbanisation, and the rise of social movements, Webster's story quietly recontextualises the realities of women's lives in these transitional years, mirroring the strains and ruptures characterising the lives of women during this time. Jerusha's journey toward self-discovery resonates with the Progressive Era's emphasis on education, reform, and the emergence of the “New Woman” seeking greater autonomy. Although Webster was not an orphan, working with children's homes in New York City deeply informed her depiction of Jerusha's vicissitudes and dreams. This contextualisation, therefore,

paints a richer picture on each front of how Jerusha's epistolary voice becomes both an object of rebellion within and a weapon against society's oppressions.

The paper seeks to advance narrative theory by asserting that *Daddy-Long-Legs* serves as a case in point for how structural choices inherent to the epistolary form can deconstruct hierarchical relationships without the necessity of an exterior narrative layer. Through significant attention to Jerusha's focalisation, the strategic use of temporal ellipses, and the tension between personal expression and performative address in the novel, this paper shows how Webster's story becomes more than just a coming-of-age narrative; it evolves into a complex analysis on powers of storytelling and the intersection of self-expression, gender politics, and control. By examining these themes, readers can better appreciate the timelessness of *Daddy-Long-Legs* as a text that remains relevant today, as readers struggle with issues of identity construction and the struggle for women to have power over their own lives.

Research Questions

The paper tries to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways does the epistolary form of *Daddy-Long-Legs* serve to illustrate Jerusha Abbott's narrative voice and capacity for self-representation?
2. How does Jerusha's focalisation shift throughout the novel, and what does this indicate about her development as a person?
3. How do Genette's definitions of focalisation and temporal ellipses contribute to readers' understanding of novel control in Jerusha's letters?
4. How does Altman's model of epistolary as a 'terrain of voices in dialogue' depict Jerusha's

strategic use of letter writing to negotiate power and assert identity?

Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* and Its Historical Context

Jean Webster was born on January 24, 1876, and was an American author best remembered for her novels focusing on female protagonists. Additionally, she wrote screenplays and later transitioned into a producer. Her father died at an early age, and her mother supported her four children on a teacher's salary. When Jean was six, the family moved to a farm near Rome, New York. She was educated at the Rome Free Academy and Vassar College, earning a Bachelor of Arts in 1899. She became a writer to help provide for her mother and siblings and to make a point against the issues of the time—social and economic inequality and women's role in society (Literary Ladies Guide 2021)

Jean Webster's original name was Alice Jane Chandler, which was later changed to Jean Webster. Webster explained in her preface to the novel the reason behind the name: "My little book is representative of my best and noblest self, just as I am in this larger world of mine, only a portion of my life is worth its being remembered" (Webster 1912, p.3). Written in 1912, *Daddy Long Legs* is a story told through a series of letters from Judy Abbott to her benefactor. Her bright character and unfettered spirit made her one of the most popular young heroines in American literature (Literary Ladies Guide, 2021). The novel is often credited with helping to popularize orphans in literature. Though Webster was never an orphan, she grew up surrounded by orphans, having attended a children's home in New York City. Her childhood experience inspired her to write this novel.

The novel emerged during a period of significant transformation in American history. In the early years of the century, the United States was still evolving into a key political and logistical power on the world stage, transitioning from the industrial era into a resource-rich nation. However, this milestone also unfolded against a backdrop of social unrest, as evident in the legacy of conflicts such as the Spanish-American War and initiatives undertaken by Teddy Roosevelt that departed from isolationist policies. The societal landscape was characterised by movements such as the Temperance movement, which ultimately led to alcohol prohibition, alongside fervent calls for women's suffrage and education. The plot subtly mirrors these societal pressures and transformations. The latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries was critical for the socio-political atmosphere from which *Daddy-Long-Legs* emerged (Carruthers and Wanamaker 2015, p. 25).

As Keely (1999) observes, Webster demonstrates a strong social commitment to the downtrodden and disenfranchised in her writings as a socialist and feminist. Keely continues that Webster's ability to incorporate a social conscience into a captivating romantic tale shapes a new generation curious about political and social issues (Keely 1999, p.21). In another study, Keely emphasises that the author's novels, *Daddy-Long-Legs* and *Dear Enemy*, were written to teach her readers about eugenic family studies and her belief in hereditary reasoning (Keely 1999, pp. 63–64).

During this period, consolidated social policy and philanthropic action highlighted the need for reform. They prioritised free access to information and education for the population, generating a broader audience open to receiving literature. Meanwhile, secular charities focused on various

groups were established alongside the creation of hospitals and schools aimed at marginalised individuals, such as the physically and mentally disabled. A new class of urban centres brought a literary landscape that resisted efforts to subdue the industrialisation engulfing the middle class. These social changes and drastic medical advances fostered a vigorous reform movement, resulting in remarkable discoveries. The persistence of dubious practices, prodded by spectacle-based economics following the Civil War, was also notable (Karl and Katz 1981, p. 237). Reactions to the buoyant concentration of urban poverty included reformists and a host of missionaries, who organised around middle-class interests inspired by “a moral upsurge” in the communities.

Kelly (1999) stated that the most well-known and enduring example of the epistolary novel style, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is *Daddy-Long-Legs*, which Phillips refers to as the American Cinderella tale (Kelly 1999, p. 64). She states that Webster created a college novel, another popular literary genre at its publication, in an epistolary style by emphasising the female voice and female education (Kelly 1999, p. 46). During that period, experts were concerned that women's access to higher education would interfere with their ability to procreate and marry (Kelly 1999, p.67). Webster aims to address these issues by using this book to highlight the benefits of the college experience for women. Given that Webster believes women must pursue higher education as well as the possibility of doing so, Phillips (1999) characterises this novel as “an important cultural marker” (Phillips 1999, p.79), which was primarily intended for adult readers since, at the time of its publication, it promoted women's rights to higher education in American society.

Results and Discussion

A Genettian Reading of *Daddy-Long-Legs*

Genette's theory of voice — the interaction of narrator and story — highlights what Jerusha's letters accomplish for her as a means of self-creation. As the sole narrator, she controlled the narrative and elaborated on her persona, transforming from a docile ward to an assertive mind (Genette 1980, p. 187). From a narrative perspective, readers feel engaged in *Daddy-Long-Legs*, primarily due to Judy Abbott's first-person narrative voice. The method allows readers to immerse themselves deeply in Judy's reality, granting access to her internalised thoughts and emotional landscape. The limited lens provides a focused insight into Judy's emotions, revealing strands of innocence intertwined with reflection as she undergoes a metamorphosis throughout the story. From the outset, Judy welcomes readers into her inner life, addressing her benefactor by name as she writes her letters, thereby establishing a warm and informal bond. She is colourful in her stories and has a brash sense of humour that charms readers, revealing a constant negotiation between aspiration, desire, and the practicalities of achieving independence.

Early letters take a formal, scripted tone: "When receiving a birthday present, everyone should write a thank you letter. I write mine before breakfast" (Webster 1912, p. 157). Here, Jerusha's voice is performative, rooted in patriarchal standards of feminine deference. Genette's distinction between heterodiegetic (external) and homodiegetic (internal) narration underscores her initial tumble into narrative authority; she is the beneficiary, not the protagonist, of narration. By the novel's middle, Jerusha's voice falls out of that box, becoming irreverent and self-sufficient. She ridicules the benefactor's rules, including his

prohibition on thanking him: "I think it is a lovely idea to write letters. I always feel that when I receive a gift, I should express my thanks" (Webster 1912, p. 75). This change exemplifies Genette's idea of narrative distance—the emotional closeness of the narrator to the reader (Genette 1980, p. 162). When Jerusha's voice grows more confessional, the narrative distance contracts, creating intimacy and empathy.

Readers witness Judy's growth—the changes in her relationships and how she perceives herself—as they progress through the story, and her adaptable narrative voice grounds them. This epistolary form enables a nonlinear exploration of Judy's perspective, offering in-the-moment insights into her thoughts and emotions. The letters illuminate her developmental journey, charting her maturation amid external challenges and personal struggles. The letters that Judy chooses to write reveal the process of her maturation while also emphasising the themes of identity, agency, and connectivity within a fractured society.

Genette's notion of internal focalisation, which is reflected in the character's mind, plays an integral part in exploring Jerusha's growing self-awareness. Genette's *Narrative Discourse* distinguishes "who speaks" (narrator) and "who sees" (focaliser). In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, Jerusha does not just narrate; she focuses, which means her letters sift the complete narrative through her consciousness. Such permanent internal focalization — in which we can only experience events and relations like Jerusha's — encourages a sense of psychological immediacy.

The novel, for instance, employs the epistolary form to convey an intimate yet subversive narrative. By restricting the story to Jerusha Abbott's letters, Webster creates a text where personal interpretation is paramount, allowing the

reader insight into Jerusha's intensely vivid inner life. Gérard Genette's theories on narrative discourse—particularly his concepts of focalisation—facilitate an understanding of how the letter format empowers Jerusha to define herself while challenging patriarchal limitations.

Early Letters: Constrained Focalization

Early letters reveal Jerusha's limited focalisation as an orphan conditioned to perform gratitude. Her initial letters to "Mr. Smith" (her benefactor) are marked by deference: "I will begin by saying 'thank you.' (...) It seems the only proper thing to say, and I have been saying it all last week in my mind" (Webster 1912, p. 75). Jerusha's focalisation here is limited due to her subject position as a beneficiary; she self-senses, framing her thoughts in ways that are socially defensible as modesty. Genette would describe this as fixed internal focalization; the narration adheres closely to what Jerusha can perceive at any given moment. Nevertheless, her focalisation widens as she receives schooling and develops a sense of herself. By Letter 24, she criticises the power disparity built into their dynamic: "I like to pretend that you belong to me, to play with the idea, but of course, I know you do not. I am alone, my back to the wall, fighting the world. I get gassy just thinking about it. I put it out of my mind and keep pretending" (Webster 1912, p. 24).

This shift reflects Genette's concept of variable focalisation, where the narrative perspective broadens to include critical reflection. Jerusha begins questioning the benefactor's authority, destabilising the hierarchical "gaze" imposed upon her. Gérard Genette's notion of focalization separates the one who sees (the focalizer) from the one who speaks (the narrator). As an example of this phenomenon, the letters of Jerusha in *Daddy-*

Long-Legs exhibit limited performativity, as she is aware that her benefactor, Jervis Pendleton, is the intended recipient. The catering of Jerusha can be identified in the early stage of external focalization. She writes her letters with an element of artifice, as though she were trying to preserve a particular illusion.

After some time, the outer focalisation becomes excessive; as the story unfolds, Jerusha shifts to internal focalisation, revealing her letters and the truthfulness of her thoughts. This change enables readers to witness the evolution of her character, both personally and emotionally, as she begins to write for herself and another person. Her letters transform from merely performative to genuinely expressive... This signifies a critical evolution in her character while

Displaying her self-identity and independence qualities, initially in the novel's opening letters, Jerusha's limited worldview as an orphan trained to express gratitude constrains the focalization. Her letters to "Mr. Smith", her anonymous benefactor, are filled with deference and self-effacement when she wants to start with 'thank you. That is the only appropriate thing to say, and she said it all to him in her mind last week, as she indicated in the first letter.

Jerusha's perspective is constrained by her dependency on her benefactor, which censors her voice and confines her thoughts within the miasma of humility expected of those with lesser means. Genette's conception of narrative mood, concerning how deeply a narrative penetrates a character's thoughts, collapses here, as Jerusha avoids introspection in favour of performative politeness.

Expanding Focalization: Education and Self-Awareness

During her cross-country adventures, Judy faces numerous traumas yet remains steadfast in her resilience as she encounters the challenges unique to female educational institutions of her time. Her ambitions for balancing social expectations and pressures with independence place a premium on women. Judy is acutely aware of the scrutiny directed towards her as she pursues her literary and erotic ideals. Her letters trace her evolving conception of love as she navigates complicated social settings, turning down romantic propositions to preserve her sense of self. As her education progresses, Judy gains self-awareness regarding her capabilities. This burgeoning realisation reinforces her journey towards autonomy.

Judy's willingness to engage intellectually demonstrates her strength and flexibility in subverting the social frameworks that limit young women. Her character's personality is better developed; when faced with past traumas, current dreams, or desires, she becomes a more coherent whole. Using her letters, Judy expresses her dedication to finding her identity while balancing what society expects of women, ultimately finding herself. Readers are taken along on Judy's journey of genuine emotional shifts through her keen insights and critiques of the world around her. This narrative construction foregrounds Judy's agency, reinforcing that while circumstances shape Judy's journey, her grit and determination ultimately dictate the trajectory of her life. A spirited and complex character, Judy is a fascinating force who navigates a new world of knowledge and independence while confronting her hopes and dreams with those who matter most to her. Genette's framework illustrates how focalisation oscillates with Jerusha's intellectual maturation,

transforming her from a passive recipient of philanthropy to an agent in her own narrative. As she is educated, Jerusha's world opens up. By Letter 24, she is already commenting on the power imbalance in her relationship with Daddy-Long-Legs: "You are the only thing I have to care for; you are so shadowy. You are a mere fiction; an imaginary man I have composed — and probably you are quite unlike that" (Webster 1912,p.124).

In her thesis, Gyløien (2014) notes that Daddy-Long-Legs has both losses and gains: the young woman can choose a profession, pursue an education, gain practical experience, and enhance her letter-writing skills. Although she ultimately chooses a man, readers cannot help but feel that Webster sends conflicting messages with this ending. A shift in male characters is also evident in the novel, as Master Jarvis is characterised as an unstable man with radical beliefs that significantly differ from his family's Church of England convictions. Perhaps the Daddy figure is a spider, drawing women into his web of control. His opinions contrast with those of more conventional men, and he is also perceived as a socialist. Judy expresses gratitude to *Daddy-Long-Legs* for granting her freedom from the John Grier Home and the liberty to pursue a career as an author, even though he pays for her and demands she write him letters: "You see, I am becoming quite independent... You have helped me stand up, and I believe I can now walk practically by myself" (Webster 1912,p. 130). Initially ignorant of the outside world, Judy eventually evolves into a self-aware young woman who no longer harbours resentment toward the John Grier Home but views it as a positive experience that has enhanced her outlook on the outside world and herself (Gyløien 2014, p.).

As such, it exemplifies Genette's notion of variable focalisation, whereby the narrative perspective expands to encompass evaluative reflection. Jerusha's early attempts to attain these "massive things" destabilise the hierarchical "gaze" imposed upon her by the benefactor, questioning his romanticising of her and casting her as his heroine. Her letters become more and more introspective, as when, for instance, she ponders her orphan identity: "I am not a real person—just a member of the John Grier home. (...), But now I am moving to become a person — thanks to you"(Webster 1912, p. 112)

Temporal Gaps and Narrative Silence

Genette also emphasises the role of narrative time — how a story's chronology is manipulated — in constructing meaning (Genette 1980, p. 34). In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, the temporal lapses (ellipses) in Jerusha's letters represent her increasing independence from the benefactor's watchful eye. Genette also discusses the importance of narrative time, specifically the ellipses and gaps in the storytelling—Jerusha's letters leap weeks or months, creating gaps that reflect her increasing autonomy. For example, after a summer working at Lock Willow Farm, she writes: I have not written for two months, but not that I have not meant to be ungrateful... I have often thought about you" (Webster 1912,p 46).

The ellipsis here reflects her psychological distance from the benefactor; she does not feel it necessary to make constant rituals of gratitude. Genette's framework reveals how these gaps undermine the benefactor's insistent demand for surveillance, giving Jerusha the means to reclaim narrative control. Ellipsis can be seen as a means of resistance in Jerusha's letters, where it regularly elides weeks and months, thereby abandoning the

narrative gaps allowed by the benefactor's insistence on news and progress. For example, following a summer working at Lock Willow Farm (Webster 1912, pp.140–45), she observes, "I have not written for two months, but I did not mean to be ungrateful (...) I have been thinking about you many times" (Webster 1912,p. 146).

This ellipsis reflects her psychological distance from *Daddy-Long-Legs*; she no longer needs to express gratitude. Genette's notion of narrative rhythm—pausing points and pacing out events—reveals how these lacunae undermine the benefactor's hand. In teasing out her story, Jerusha reclaims possession of her narrative.

Moreover, Jerusha's letters occasionally include analepses and flashbacks that serve as a means of self-discovery, allowing readers to compare her past and present selves. For instance, she remembers her youth at the orphanage: "I used to steal pencils from the office when I would write stories. Now I have a fountain pen and reams of paper—but the stories will not come" (Webster 1912, p. 34). These anachronies emphasise her transition from an inarticulate orphan to a self-conscious scholar. Genette's temporal analysis reveals that Jerusha's narrative access to time is intellectual freedom.

Janet Altman: Epistolarity as Dialogic Resistance

Janet Altman (1983) frames the epistolary as a "double-directed" mode—both profoundly personal and intrinsically performative—and her insights help us understand how Jerusha perceives letter writing as a strategic project (Altman 1983, p. 200). Her letters become expressions of gratitude, with her awareness of the recipient, Jervis Pendleton, shaping their tone initially. As the story unfolds, Jerusha increasingly uses her

letters to push back against the inequality of their relationship and to have a chance to be her true self. This gradual evolution reflects the more significant social changes of the early 20th century, as women began to assert themselves more in their personal and professional autonomy. For example, she always calls her benefactor "*Daddy-Long-Legs*," a term of endearment that bolsters his paternalistic authority in her early letters. She lavishes gratitude for his help, declaring, "I shall study hard, and I shall become a great writer, and I shall make you feel glad that you did a good deed (Webster 1912, p 11).

Daddy-Long-Legs is the unidentified man who offers a college scholarship to the orphanage's top essayist, enabling Jerusha to attend college in exchange for letters updating him on her life and experiences there. Since she is instructed to call her benefactor Mr. John Smith and never sees him, Jerusha names him Daddy-Long-Legs in honour of an insect she spotted in a corner when he visited. Not explaining the. The daddy-long-legs spider, which lives in mysterious areas and attempts to capture its prey by shaking its web, rendering escape nearly impossible, is all that comes to mind: man. Is this Jerusha's future? His secretary informs her that the benefactor wishes for her to write because he wants to keep track of her progress, and that these mandatory letters should maintain a respectful tone (Webster 1912, p. 10). His explanation resembles a handbook outlining Jerusha's proper procedure. She is expected to comply with this.

This performativity precisely highlights the limited social roles available to women, especially those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Nevertheless, her tone changes as Jerusha matures and grows in confidence and self-awareness. In a subsequent letter, she brazenly defies his authority,

questioning his motives and her own desires: "Why don't you let me know you? I am not unreasonable. I want nothing more than to be grateful" (Webster 1912, p. 20). With her assertion of autonomy in the face of established norms, Jerusha establishes herself outside the role of a passive, grateful recipient, similar to how women were increasingly refusing to be relegated to the role of second-class citizens in an increasingly modern and feminist movement. Its analysis identifies moments when Jerusha's epistolary voice shifts from restrictive performativity to expressive self-assertion. In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Altman suggests that letters establish a "dialogic" space in which the writer negotiates identity with an absent reader (Altman 1983, p.4). In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, Jerusha's letters serve as a monologue and a dialogue—or, as Altman refers to it, the "double-directed" paradox of epistolary. Although *Daddy-Long-Legs* never answers him, Jerusha's letters create a conversation, helping her assert some agency within a patriarchal structure.

The Letter as a Space of Intimacy and Performance

Letters, Altman notes, are swinging between sincerity and performativity. Jerusha's early letters enact compliance, evidenced by her exaggerated politeness: "I think every person (...) ought to acknowledge a birthday present when they receive it with a letter of thanks. I write mine before breakfast" (Webster 1912, p. 34). In this way, the letter becomes a site for performative submission in response to Altman's claim that epistolary can work to reinscribe power hierarchies. However, as Jerusha's schooling evolves, her letters become a site for subversive authenticity. She makes fun of the benefactor's

rules, like his prohibition of thanks to him: “I have thanked you all my life, and I will thank you until I die! But do let me at least have these few” (Webster 1912,p 19).

This playful disobedience illustrates Altman’s idea of the “epistolary pact”—the unspoken agreement between writer and reader—which Jerusha renegotiates to claim her own voice. Jerusha Abbott, known fondly as Judy, writes letters to her unknown benefactor, whom she calls Daddy-Long-Legs. Her early letters feel dutiful and formal. She knows she is being read and that the one reading her words has sway over her future. This awareness informs her writing style, resulting in an above-average level of politeness and restraint. For example, she writes, “I hope you do not mind my calling you Daddy-Long-Legs. And a lot more personal than John Smith” (Webster 1912,p 24). The choice demonstrates her effort to form a bond while being aware of the hierarchies involved.

Throughout the novel, Jerusha's letters evolve to sound like her authentic voice. According to Altman’s theory, letters are not just a one-sided mode of communication; they are oriented toward a dialogue between the writer and the addressee. Jerusha’s burgeoning relationship with Jervis Pendleton allows her to be freer. Here, she is finding her stride — and a big one — writing with increasing confidence and humour, often about personal subjects that reveal her thoughts on education, societal expectations, and what she hopes for her future. She writes bluntly, “I am going to pretend that all life is just a game which I must play as skillfully and fairly as I can” (Webster 1912, p. 36). However, this shift heralds her emerging agency and awareness.

Absence and the Creation of Self

Altman points out that the absent addressee allows the letter-writer to “create” her reader, a dynamic at the heart of Jerusha’s relationship with Daddy-Long-Legs. His anonymity gives her imaginative leeway, as she confesses: “I will act as though (...) you are my entire family. (...) And this is a family letter” (Webster 1912, p. 3). By creating *Daddy-Long-Legs* as a kind of family figure, Jerusha produces a dialogic partner who not only validates her identity but also supports Jerusha’s wish for linguistic recognition. Altman’s theory elucidates how this imaginary dialogue interpellates Jerusha into a position of self-actualisation: “The letter’s power inheres in its capacity to bridge the absence while openly taking advantage of it”(Altman 1983,p.15).

Genette’s focalisation and Altman’s epistolary unravel how Webster’s narrative structure bolsters Jerusha's bid to upend the patriarchal liminality. The epistolary nature of Jerusha’s letters also allows her to explore her identity. Initially, she is trapped as an orphan with limited opportunities. The early letters give you a sense of her inferiority and uncertainty about her future. However, with Jervis’s encouragement and support for her education, Jerusha pushes herself to write boldly, stating that she believes in her own free will. Her power to do so demonstrates an inflexion point in her journey toward self-empowerment.

Altman’s model illustrates how the addressee affects the writer’s voice. Jervis’s paraphrased rather than quoted responses are palpable in Jerusha’s evolving tone and content. When her impression of him is more of a supportive figure than a benefactor, her letters become more open and honest. This dynamic relationship fosters intimacy between Jerusha and Mr. Johnsy,

allowing Jerusha the space to discuss not only her academic progress but also her dreams and fears.

Jerusha's internal focalisation transforms from a mechanism of confinement to one of freedom. The early letters contain external particulars (her plain wardrobe, the orphanage's rules). However, the later entries turn inward, reflexively inspecting her place in the world: "I am no longer that little girl that left the John Grier Home. Even my appearance has changed" (Webster 1912, p. 62). Genette's model illustrates how this shift in focalization—from the external observer to an internal critic—coincides with Jerusha's intellectual awakening. This is especially so as Altman's dialogic framework sheds light on how Jerusha's letters weaponise familiarity. Opening up about her ambitions and insecurities, she turns *Daddy-Long-Legs* from a patriarchal overseer into a collaborator in her self-creation: "I am going to become a writer. (...) If I am not able to be a great author, I can at least write letters" (Webster 1912, p. 150). As Altman suggests, writing is an act of resistance, a method of reclaiming narrative authority.

Letters as Social Commentary

Judy's journey involves several traumatic experiences, and as she encounters women's colleges during her era, she remains steadfast. Although society shapes her a certain way, Judy desires greater cultural freedom. As she strives to fulfil her literary and romantic aspirations, she remains aware of the watchful eyes that surround her. Her letters further elaborate on her romantic journey, which unfolds alongside the complex societal interactions, during which she rejects multiple suitors to preserve her uniqueness. By the end of her education, Judy becomes increasingly self-aware of her abilities. This self-knowledge

lays the groundwork for her growing desire for autonomy.

Through her intellectual curiosity, Judy demonstrates her refusal to accept the gender roles imposed on young women by society. Instead, she embodies perseverance, resilience, and a determination to pursue her desires. Her character is multifaceted, blending elements of her significant past experiences, dreams, and aspirations into a cohesive individual. In her letters, Judy articulates her fervent wish to discover her identity beyond societal expectations. Through Judy's perceptive observations and critical reflections on societal norms, readers become immersed in her emotional landscape, witnessing her challenges, accomplishments, and internal conflicts. This narrative structure emphasises Judy's agency, highlighting that although circumstances affect her journey, her strength and assertiveness steer the course of her life. Judy's vibrant, multifaceted character captivates readers as she navigates knowledge and independence while balancing her aspirations with meaningful connections. Readers are drawn into Judy's emotional orbit—from struggle to achievement to her fundamental contradictions—through her insightful observations and critical analysis of the underlying issues within modern society. This narrative structure reinforces Judy's agency, establishing that while external factors shape each milestone of her journey, her strength and resolve determine her destiny. A synergy exists between her character and the essence of America—a complex and rich portrayal. Concurrently, Judy navigates the delicate balance between shrewdness and freedom, between competing ambitions and significant relationships.

According to Kelly (2004), near the novel's end, Judy experiences a panic attack regarding her

mysterious origins. She declines Jervis's proposal because she feels it would be inappropriate for someone with no antecedents to marry into his family (Kelly 2004, p. 367). "I did not tell him about the orphanage, and I was embarrassed to admit I had no idea who I was. You know, I might be terrible" (Webster 1912, p. 292). While Judy possesses a strong sense of self-worth and believes she is not terrible based on the evidence, she currently follows a hereditary logic that equates having terrible ancestors with being terrible herself. Given that Jervis is a Socialist and holds unconventional ideas (Webster 1912, p. 293), which have somewhat alienated him from his family, she thinks he might handle the truth, even before discovering that he is, in fact, *Daddy-Long-Legs* and aware of her past. Consequently, she writes to *Daddy-Long-Legs*, contemplating revealing everything to Jervis. Now, Jervis/*Daddy-Long-Legs* steps forward and discloses the truth.

In addition to Jerusha's personal development, her letters offer substantial social commentary on gender roles and societal expectations during the early 20th century. Her reflections on life at the John Greer Home reveal the limitations imposed on women of her time. Half the time, she wryly observes, "I have no idea what they are talking about; their jokes seem to refer to some experience that everyone but myself has had" (Webster 1912, p. 76). This statement underscores her alienation from the societal structures that dictate women's behaviour. Jervis's kindness and attentiveness gradually guide Jerusha towards discovering her voice. She begins to resist the constraints placed upon young women. Her letters function as a medium to articulate her differing perspectives on traditional expectations of women and assert her autonomy: "I have a terrible wander thirst; the very sight of a map makes me want to

put on my hat, take an umbrella, and start" (Webster 1912, p. 32). This yearning for exploration signifies a physical journey and an intellectual one.

Conclusion

With Genette and Altman as our guides, *Daddy-Long-Legs* becomes a narrative tapestry—a feminist figuration of inter-resonances. Through internal focalization and dialogic performance, the epistolary structure enables Jerusha to transcend the position of a passive beneficiary and ultimately construct a self-determined identity. She writes in her last letter: "Except to make you happy, which makes me happy, so I am not a bit of use to the world" (Webster 1912, p. 94). This line, with its dry irony, distils her act of subversion. While seemingly endorsing her role as a grateful charge, she quietly reclaims the power to redefine the nature of their relationship. Webster's novel is thus a hymn to the revolutionary potential of narrative form—a potential that Jerusha brings to life with her pen.

Within literary studies, Gérard Genette's narrative discourse is one of the most complex analysis theories alongside Lacanian psychoanalytic narratology. Genette's analysis encompasses various strategies in telling a story, focusing on how narrative discourse is constituted by particular syntaxes, which "have the power to assign focalisation to characters" (Webster 1912, p. 157). This is crucial—these are not merely technical aspects of writing; they serve as the factories for the responses that the written text elicits in the reader. By examining how the narrative is constructed, readers can delve deeply into the text, gaining insight into the novelist's intentions and the reader's interpretations.

In *Daddy-Long-Legs*, Jean Webster expertly uses the epistolary format to chronicle Jerusha Abbott's evolution from a self-doubting orphan to a self-sufficient young woman. Janet Altman's framework of epistolary literature illustrates how Jerusha's letters reflect the progression of her correspondence with Jervis Pendleton. Their correspondence serves as a dialogical space where Jerusha expresses herself personally and analyses the social landscape of her time and the literary arena in which she ultimately finds herself. Jerusha transitions from carefully controlled performativity to genuine self-expression, highlighting the power dynamics in their relationship and what transpires when dialogue is allowed to give voice. Delving deeper into these aspects within *Daddy-Long-Legs* provides a richer understanding of how letter writing serves as a personal outlet and a means of engaging with broader social issues. This exemplifies how epistolary literature remains pertinent for exploring complex human experiences.

Through Jean Webster's epistolary format, *Daddy-Long-Legs* is enriched in narrative and character development. By writing in letters, the reader gains insight into the most intimate aspects of Judy's experience. As they type these lines, the reader is privy to the thoughts that transpire in Judy's mind as she writes to her mysterious benefactor. These memoirs vividly portray Judy's struggles, fantasies, and unrevealed reflections. The narrative intimacy achieved through these letters is challenging, if not impossible, to replicate with conventional third-person narration.

Recommendations for further studies

The novel highlights the potential for disadvantaged children to succeed if given opportunities—a message that resonated with

social workers. It also aligns with other trends in early 20th-century literature advocating for higher education for women, as exemplified in popular tales of the College Girl. Psychological analysis delves into Judy's identity formation and attachment issues stemming from her orphan status. Her increasingly intimate relationship with *Daddy-Long-Legs* symbolises the psychological struggles of over-dependence versus independence. Lastly, adaptation studies investigate transitions of literary texts to screens and cinema alongside their source material, examining how particular themes and characters manifest differently across various periods and media. They also provide fruitful avenues for exploration. This approach can illuminate shifting cultural attitudes and artistic interpretations from one decade to the next.

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