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Shaping meaning: Women's diaries, journals, and lettersâ€™”The old and the new

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to map some of the terrain of the diary/journal genre, for although personal chronicling is an â€™oldâ€™™ art, little interest has been shown historically in women's diaries and there have been few conceptual assessments of it. Therefore this paper seeks to ask a series of questions designed to help determine whether there is a discrete genre and to establish some of its characteristics.

Approximately one hundred diaries have been read as the basis for the discussion of this form.

The reason for such a basic exercise is that so little conceptual material is available. As there is growing interest in women's personal chronicles, it would seem useful to be able to *name* them and to offer some explanation for them both in terms of the writing â€™” and the reading. The fundamental issues addressed are the ways in which diaries and journals differ from memoirs and the reasons for their relative â€™”immediacyâ€™™

Journals differ from memoirs and the reason for keeping relatively "immediate" records; questions as to why women have written diaries, and why women read them, are also raised, along with the issue of the relationship between the writer and the reader.

The many forms of chronicling, including consideration of various purposes (e.g., a travel diary) and various audiences (e.g., private or public), are discussed in an attempt to outline the characteristics of the genre. Finally, the potential educational uses of journals will also be explored.



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