

KATHARINE WILSON

## The Unrepresentable Self: Epistolarity and Intertextuality in Richard Wright's *Clara Callan*

---

### Résumé

Le roman *Clara Callan* (2001) de l'auteur canadien Richard Wright utilise une combinaison de lettres et d'entrées de journal pour raconter l'histoire de deux sœurs vivant dans l'Ontario rural et à New York entre 1934 et 1938. En utilisant une forme épistolaire mixte, composée des lettres à Clara et des lettres de Clara ainsi que des extraits de son journal intime, Wright crée non seulement une atmosphère historique appropriée pour le roman, mais renforce également les thèmes de la défamiliarisation et de la déconnexion. L'épistolarité est utilisée pour souligner le sentiment de distance entre Clara et le lecteur, parmi les personnages différents du roman et entre les niveaux diégétiques du roman. Wright favorise la défamiliarisation par l'utilisation spécifique de la forme épistolaire mixte et souligne l'idée que Clara est incapable de communiquer suffisamment son identité, et positionne le soi comme une construction à la fois inaccessible et irreprésentable pour les autres. En outre, Wright utilise des références intertextuelles provenant de divers médias comme autant de reflets potentiels du soi et des stéréotypes restrictifs qui limitent l'identité. Le potentiel de représenter l'identité par l'intertextualité est encore plus déstabilisé en estompant la ligne entre le texte et l'intertexte, à la fois dans l'univers fictif du roman et entre les niveaux diégétiques. Comme le montre cet article, les tentatives de Clara de rendre son identité par l'intertexte, lorsqu'elles sont mises en parallèle avec la thématisation de la déconnexion dans le roman par une forme épistolaire mixte, situent l'idée de soi comme quelque chose d'intrinsèquement irreprésentable sur la page.

### Abstract

Canadian author Richard Wright's 2001 novel *Clara Callan* uses a combination of letters and diary entries to tell the story of two sisters living in rural Ontario and New York City from 1934–1938. Wright's use of a mixed epistolary form consisting of letters to and from Clara alongside her personal diary entries not only creates an appropriate historical atmosphere for the novel, but also reinforces themes of defamiliarization and disconnection. Epistolarity is used to emphasize a sense of distance between Clara and the reader, between various characters in the novel, and between the novel's diegetic levels. The defamiliarization fostered by Wright's specific use of mixed epistolary form highlights the idea that Clara is unable to sufficiently communicate her identity, and positions the self as a construct both unknowable and unrepresentable to others. Additionally, Wright uses

*intertextual references from various media as both potential reflections of the self and restrictive stereotypes which constrict identity. The potential of representing identity via intertextuality is further destabilized through the blurring of the lines between text and intertext both within the novel's fictional universe and between diegetic levels within the novel. As this article demonstrates, Clara's attempts at intertextually rendering her identity, when taken alongside the novel's thematization of disconnection through a mixed epistolary form, locates the idea of self as something inherently unrepresentable on the page.*

---

## Introduction

*Clara Callan*, Canadian author Richard B. Wright's tenth novel, uses a blend of epistolary and diary forms to tell the story of four years in the lives of sisters Clara and Nora. The novel received much critical acclaim and was a recipient of both the Giller Prize and the Governor General's Award. Throughout the novel, Wright characterizes identity as both understood through and confined by a variety of diverse intertexts; an idea that is furthered even more by the appearance of new technologies in the interwar years. *Clara Callan's* unique impact lies with its blended use of epistolary and diary forms alongside the thematization of intertextuality in order to explore a conception of the self as unknowable and unrepresentable.

An understanding of identity as defined by cultural scripts acted out in mass media and new technologies is not confined to our contemporary era or contemporary postmodern literature. In fact, the disparate realms of literature, radio, and film represented in *Clara Callan* provide both understanding and restriction for the novel's various characters, in particular, Clara. Wright's near-continuous use of allusions to various real-world literature, radio, and film pieces in addition to references to media properties and events from within his fictional universe establishes the identities of his characters as continually in flux and essentially societally mediated. Don Sparling writes, in this context, that the characters in *Clara Callan* "play out their lives" against "[a] sense of the inexplicable mystery of human existence and the existential isolation of individuals in the contemporary world" (2019, 253). Wright's foregrounding of identity as something mediated by intertextuality reflects an understanding of the self as something ultimately unable to be represented and unable to be known by others.

The mixed epistolary mode of *Clara Callan* also serves as catalyst for Wright's explorations of identity. The novel's combination of Clara's diary entries and her letters to and from other characters helps showcase the futility of representing the self, as the reader can see the acute differences between Clara's personal writings and how she presents herself to others. Moreover, the added diegetic level of her daughter Elizabeth's editorial work introduced at the end of the novel continues this destabilization

of the concept of identity. Taken together, *Clara Callan's* mixed epistolary mode and constant, almost oppressive use of intertextuality demonstrate the futility of attempting to know and communicate the unrepresentable self.

### **Epistolary as Disconnection**

The narrative structure of *Clara Callan* (a combination of diary entries and letters) is a crucial tool used to communicate the core themes of the novel. Janet Altman explains that in epistolary fiction, "the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works" (1982, 4). The mixed epistolary mode employed by Wright is a significant part of his thematization of the unrepresentable nature of identity. Epistolary in *Clara Callan* contributes to a sense of defamiliarization throughout the novel and emphasizes points of disconnection between various attempts at representing the self. There are three primary ways Wright's mixed epistolary mode contributes to his claims about identity: disconnection between the reader and the novel's characters, disconnection between individual characters within the novel, and disconnection between the novel's various diegetic levels.

The first level of disconnection emphasized by Wright's mixed epistolary mode is between the reader and the novel's characters. Elizabeth MacArthur points out that both

real and fictional epistolary narratives require the reader's active participation, whether to replace the absent narrator or to share in producing an exchange. The reader necessarily enters into dialogue with the epistolary text, a dialogue that is never resolved and never completed (1990, 273).

In epistolary narratives, everything is filtered through the lens of the letter writer; the lack of an authoritative narrator requires the reader to take on a more active interpretive role than that required by non-epistolary writing. Regarding diary fiction, Porter Abbott describes this phenomenon well, explaining that "[...] as we read, we are made simultaneously aware of two events, the event recorded and the event of recording" (1984, 29). Since *Clara Callan* consists entirely of texts composed by various characters, the knowledge that everything presented in the novel comes directly from the pen of the character writing the letter means that the reader must take into account said character's reliability, biases, memory, and other characteristics often (though not always) elided by the presence of an external narratorial figure. Altman explains that "epistolary writing, as distinguished from simple first-person writing, refracts events through not one but two prisms – that of reader as well as that of writer. We as external readers must always interpret a given letter in the light of its intended recipient" (1982, 92). As *Clara Callan* consists of both letters and diary entries, readers

must interpret the text not only through the lens of the intended recipient (in the case of letters), but also through the lens of Clara's own personality (in the case of her diary entries), and then synthesize these sometimes disparate narrative threads in order to paint a complete picture of the novel's events. Rachel Bower explains that in epistolary narratives, "the reader is also frequently charged with the responsibility to make sense of a discontinuous narrative, compiled of discrete, discontinuous documents" (2017, 19). Because Clara's representation of herself and the novel's events changes depending on whom she is writing to and the form of writing (letter versus diary), the reader is forced to juggle these vastly different representations of her identity and attend to the novel's actual events alongside the problem of how they are represented. This fosters a sense of disconnection and defamiliarization between the reader and the text, providing an ideal backdrop for the novel's thematization of the problems of identity and representation.

Examined alone, Clara's diary entries contribute to the novel's defamiliarization in a particular way. Despite the form of the diary entry seeming, at first glance, to contain more unmediated and direct access to her identity, Clara's diary entries still raise questions regarding the unrepresentable self. Abbott notes that in more contemporary diary narratives, "we no longer ask our diarist to give a wholly sincere account of her feelings. We ask instead that we be allowed to see the truth of those feelings through the mixture of sincerity and self-deception that governs her text" (1984, 21). Despite the lack of a direct addressee, Clara's diary entries still contain gaps of meaning the reader must grapple with. One example of this is when there is a significant stretch of time between entries. This happens several times early on in the novel, with Clara writing a diary entry on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1934, and then not again until December 31<sup>st</sup>, spurred on by a letter from Nora. After this entry, the next is not until the end of January. Then, following an entry in early February, the next is not until March. These long gaps are made even more conspicuous by the fact that they are usually followed by a period where Clara writes entries every few days, with no explanation or discussion of the time missed. Although Clara's diary entries could be positioned as a supposedly more genuine reflection of her identity than her letters, long gaps without entries undermine this assumption and contribute to a sense of disconnection between the reader and Clara.

Additionally, there are multiple references to Clara burning or otherwise disposing of poetry and writing that does not live up to her standards. Very early on in the novel, Nora writes to Clara, "remember how you used to fill those scribblers with poems and then some Sunday morning, right out of the blue, start tearing the pages and burning them in the kitchen stove?" (Wright 2001, 13). This early introduction of the idea that there is written material hidden from the reader further destabilizes the idea that Clara's diary entries or letters could be a reliable source to represent her identity. The lack of what might be called a truthful representation of the self in Wright's novel raises important questions about the pitfalls of representing identity textually, and

contributes to the thematization of the self as not only unrepresentable, but ultimately unknowable.

The second way that Wright uses a mixed epistolary form to highlight the unrepresentable nature of the self is through disconnections between the novel's various characters. Altman writes, "given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge" (1982, 13). Wright certainly emphasizes the distance between his characters, particularly Clara and Nora. Due to Clara's refusal to have a telephone installed for most of the novel, the characters communicate almost exclusively through letters. This not only means that time elapses between when a letter is written and when it is received and read, it also means that communication between characters is almost never spontaneous, since their letters have been deliberately composed and edited before being sent. The distance between Clara and Nora becomes even more obvious when they attempt to resolve time-sensitive issues without immediate communicative access. When Clara admits to Nora that she is pregnant (for the first time) and asks for help via a letter, Nora is forced to make arrangements without consulting Clara, and specifically remarks on how everything would be much easier with access to a telephone. She writes, "damn it, I wish you would join the twentieth century and get a telephone!!! We are wasting so much time because you insist on living in the last century. God Almighty!!!" (Wright 2001, 69). Wright's deliberate use of letters as a distancing factor between his characters highlights the distance (both physical and emotional) between Clara and Nora. The letter as a symbol of disconnection between characters in the novel further highlights Clara's struggle with representing her identity to others via writing.

Additionally, discrepancies between Clara's letters and diary entries also help question the novel's representations of identity. As Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh emphasize, "the protagonist's accounts of events in her letters to her sister Nora not only radically differ from the narrativizing of the same events in the diary, but [...] some events are entirely concealed from Nora" (2018, 18–19). It is not an uncommon occurrence that Clara's diary entries are preoccupied with a certain topic that is entirely absent from her letters. One example of this is when Clara is raped by a tramp and becomes pregnant. Though Nora helps Clara to get an abortion, Clara conceals the true story behind her pregnancy from Nora for the vast majority of the novel. Despite Nora's attempts to offer emotional support, Clara keeps the details of her rape to herself. In a diary entry, she writes,

I wasn't about to tell Nora the sordid details of my encounter with the tramp. She wanted a love story: assignations, letters, meeting in cars on country roads, whispered embraces and the fluttering of hearts in hopeless passion. But since it wasn't like that, the tale was beyond me (Wright 2001, 89).

While Clara's diary entries are preoccupied with the trauma from her rape, her letters to all other characters keep this huge event concealed. Clara's unwillingness or inability to share certain parts of herself with those around her further emphasizes the unstable nature of identity in the novel. Having access to Clara's diary entries alongside the letters she writes and receives allows the reader to see the tension between how Clara presents herself to other characters versus her diary entries, creating questions around what Clara's real voice might be. Neither the diary nor the letter constitutes unmediated self-expression, as both require deliberate composition and the translation of events and thoughts into writing. Using a mixed epistolary form to make the reader aware of the disconnection between Clara and other characters in the novel allows Wright to present the self as something not able to be represented to others and/or on the page.

The final way in which Wright uses his particular narrative form to create a sense of disconnection and defamiliarization is through the introduction of an additional diegetic level in the novel's afterword, which functions as a framing device for the story as a whole. In the afterword, the reader becomes aware for the first time that the collection of Clara's letters and diary entries they have been reading is a publication compiled by Clara's daughter, Elizabeth, after Clara's death. The introduction of Elizabeth essentially shifts *Clara Callan* away from the traditional epistolary narrative (consisting of fictionalized letters) to a more complicated novel-within-a-novel, where the primary text is something that has been edited and compiled by another fictional character (in this case, Elizabeth). Altman argues that the effect of this type of structure in epistolary fiction is "to blur the distinction between external and internal reader. Between the internal addressee and the external eavesdropper lie the internal eavesdroppers" (1982, 111). In *Clara Callan*, the fact that this additional diegetic level is introduced for the first time at the end of the novel is additionally destabilizing. The realization that Elizabeth, acting as an editor figure, has been reading over our shoulders for the entire novel places even more space between the external reader and any sense of Clara's identity. During the novel's epilogue, the reader discovers that Clara's writings are not only mediated through the innate distance created by epistolarity, but that they exist inside another textual container entirely, that of Elizabeth's publication. The afterword does not address what level of editing, if any, was applied to Clara's writings. They could be presented in their entirety, or Elizabeth could have changed or removed certain sections. It is also possible that Clara herself removed certain letters or diary entries, either explicitly to prevent Elizabeth from accessing them or for another reason entirely. Due to the multiple textual references to burning or otherwise destroying texts, avoiding these questions is difficult. The fact that they remain unresolved creates yet another barrier between the novel's external reader and any semblance of truth, especially concerning identity. Linda Kauffman explains that the introduction of an editor figure in epistolary fiction "problematizes the dichotomies between fiction/reality, inside/outside, lies/truth, character/author, past/present, self/other" (1992, 171). Wright's use of the classic epistolary editor/com-

piler figure introduces unresolved questions regarding how much of Clara's identity has been genuinely translated to the page. The disconnection between the novel's diegetic levels continues to create a defamiliarizing effect for the reader, and showcases the instability of representations of identity in the novel.

It is not only the existence of the novel's afterword, but also its content that fosters disconnection between *Clara Callan's* diegetic levels. In the afterword, the reader learns that Evelyn, a close friend of the sisters whom Nora had met in New York, died in a car accident when Elizabeth was one year old. The fact that the novel's internal and external readers (including Elizabeth herself) only know Evelyn through the letters she wrote to Clara raises even more questions about textual representations of identity. The entirety of Evelyn's life is encapsulated in her letters to and from Clara (although letters to other characters must certainly have existed), raising questions about what it means for one's entire existence to be contained within a very specific set of texts. For the novel's external reader and the internal readers of Elizabeth's publication, Clara's entire identity is contained within the diary entries and letters she wrote during the four years in which the novel takes place. The afterword's thematization of how a self can be known only via a collection of texts continues the destabilization of representations of identity throughout the main body of the novel.

Elizabeth's comments in the afterword about her relationship with Clara also emphasize the instability of textual representations of identity. Despite Clara's final diary entry suggesting that she may someday tell Elizabeth all about her life, the afterword opens with, "my mother never did tell me any of those things" (Wright 2001, 409). The reader is shown here that the Clara presented through her writings is very different than the Clara that Elizabeth knew, again presenting a disconnection between the novel's different diegetic levels. The reader also learns in the afterword that Elizabeth was never told the truth about her father, with Elizabeth writing that Clara said, "he was killed in a hunting accident before you were born, Elizabeth, [...]. Now, please. No more questions about him" (410). Thus, it is only through access to Clara's letters and diary entries after her death that Elizabeth learns the full story of her parentage. Positioning Elizabeth as an editor figure seeking to create meaning out of Clara's texts further contributes to the idea of identity as something not able to be textually represented. Löschnigg and Schuh write that epistolary fiction "thematizes the inherent fallacies of all meaning-making processes, based as they always are on the abstract notion of a totality that is never really accessible" and go on to say that the existence of an editor figure further thematizes the problematic nature of reconstructing meaning from fragmented texts (2018, 26). Elizabeth's role as an editor/compiler figure and her marked interest in understanding Clara's identity through the novel's letters and diary entries further the sense of disconnection between diegetic levels in the novel. As Elizabeth joins the novel's reader in the privileged position of having access to both Clara's letters and personal diary, any sense of understanding of Clara's identity begins to become further destabilized, as yet another textual lens is added (that of Elizabeth's publication) with which the reader must contend.

The mixture of letter and diary form which makes up *Clara Callan* contributes to Wright's exploration of identity as something inherently unrepresentable and unknowable. Altman writes of "the letter's dual potential for transparency (portrait of soul, confession, vehicle of narrative) and opacity (mask, weapon, event within narrative)" (1982, 186), an apt description of the letters, diary entries and afterword of *Clara Callan*. Wright's chosen narrative form highlights points of disconnection between the novel's reader and its characters, between characters within the novel, and between the novel's diegetic levels, never setting forth a reliable standard for a genuine representation of identity. Neither is it in Clara's letters, nor in her diary entries that her 'true self' is reflected; nor is her true self revealed by the context given in the afterword. Rather, the self is shown to be unrepresentable on an inherent level, regardless of the narrative form used.

### **Identity as (Inter)Text**

The thematization of intertextuality in *Clara Callan* is another way in which the novel portrays the self as unrepresentable. Just as the epistolary form is frequently concerned with questions of (dis)connection, intertextuality, as Graham Allen points out, "foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness, and interdependence in modern cultural life" (2022, 5). The intertextual allusions to various real-world and in-universe media referenced throughout *Clara Callan* contribute to an understanding of the self as unrepresentable in three distinct ways: intertexts as reflections of identity, intertexts as restraints on identity, and blurred distinctions between intertexts and reality.

One primary way that intertextuality is used in *Clara Callan* is to reflect a character's identity. In particular, Clara's identity is frequently depicted as something that can be understood through the specific combination of literary allusions she makes reference to. Allen writes that to modern theorists, "meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext" (2022, 1). This view of intertextuality as signifying a never-ending process of uncovering relational meaning directly parallels Wright's use of intertextuality to highlight questions of identity and representation. Rather than something stable and explainable, Clara's intertextual allusions portray her identity as an ever-deepening network of references, something that can only be understood and represented by using external allusions as frames of reference. Heinrich Plett describes an intertext as something "characterized by attributes that exceed it. It is not delimited, but delimited, for its constituents refer to constituents of one or several other texts" (1991, 5). Clara's deliberate use of literary allusions characterizes her identity as a collection of intertexts, a compilation of references that endlessly circle back on themselves.

Clara's representation of herself in both her letters and diary entries uses intertextuality as a way to understand and reflect identity. Writing to Evelyn, she comments, "isn't it odd how, even when we are not feeling quite ourselves, we can still transcend



our feelings through words" (Wright 2001, 210). For Clara, it is not only writing which helps her transcend (and understand) herself, but reading. The novels she reads are chronicled in her diary entries, and also serve as a point of connection in her early friendship with Evelyn. Even though she laments that her love affair with Frank has caused her to feel "emptied of any words that would make sense" in terms of her own poetry, she is able to use a literary intertext to explain her feelings, writing that she feels "like poor Emma Bovary looking in the mirror after her first encounter with Rodolphe" (289, 281). In his essay "Intertextuality and Ontology", John Frow writes that "the identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading" (1990, 46). When Clara turns to intertextual literary references in her letters and diaries, we as readers are invited to interpret and understand Clara's identity along these intertextual lines. Clara is not only better able to understand and express herself through her personal network of (primarily literary) intertexts, but the reader's conception of her identity is understood through this intertextual lens as well.

In addition to using literary allusions to describe and understand her life and identity, Clara also turns to particular literary works with relevance to her situation as a form of emotional comfort. After making the decision to raise her and Frank's child as a single, unwed mother, Clara writes in a diary entry,

at the library I took out *The Scarlet Letter*. I tried to read this when I was fifteen or sixteen, but it defeated me. Perhaps now Hawthorne's genius will shine through all the verbiage. Twenty years ago I found him a terrible old windbag. Now that I can truly identify with poor Hester however ... (Wright 2001, 380).

Just as the novel's reader can attempt to parse Clara's literary references in order to gain insight into her identity, Clara reaches for these same references to delineate and analyze her own identity. Ben Bachmair notes that "[...] the capacity of individuals to create meanings is ultimately circumscribed by the limited range of symbolic resources available to them" (2000, 126). Clara's literary allusions not only allow the novel's reader insight into her identity, but also serve as a resource for her own identity formation and a way she can attribute meaning to events and circumstances in her life.

However, Wright does not only use intertextuality as a tool to represent and attempt to understand identity. The various intertextual references throughout the text are often destabilized or undermined in order to portray the self as ultimately unrepresentable. As Plett explains,

the author who re-employs fragments from poetic (pre-)texts in his own poetic text does so with certain intentions. [...] A negative common de-

nominator could be that the author's primary purpose is not to bring his audience to an immediate confrontation with reality, but only with mirrors of reality, i.e. literature [...] (1991, 15).

The continual infusion of external (i.e. real-world) literary intertexts into Clara's letters and diary entries serves as a reminder that the reader is interacting with a novel (i.e. a deliberately constructed text), which has the effect of never allowing for full immersion into the novel's fictional world and foregrounding the constructed and non-natural nature of all (inter)texts, literary or other. Although literary allusions seem to allow the reader to gain some measure of insight into Clara's identity, Wright continually shows us that such allusions are imperfect and unstable representations rather than genuine information about the self. It is, in particular, Clara's own poetic endeavors, which function as intertexts within the novel's fictional universe, which emphasize how intertextuality can only reflect identity imperfectly.

Very few of Clara's poems are actually reproduced in her diary entries, and none in her letters. Instead, she tends to sketch out her idea for a poem in great detail rather than actually composing a functional draft. One example of this is in Clara's diary entry from December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1934, which begins, "Notes for a poem entitled *To a Thirty-Eight-Year-Old Father of Six Who Hanged Himself One Sunday Morning in a Railway Shed*", and continues with two pages of descriptive prose text (2001, Wright 22). Other descriptions are not as lengthy, such as in the diary entry from February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1938: "I worked on a poem all evening called *Cow in a China Shop*. All about sexual desire and the havoc it can create. It was ribald, brazen and indecent. Threw the various drafts into the stove this morning." (332–333) When talking to Ella Myles, one of Clara's former students who has been sending her hateful anonymous letters, Clara explains why she throws away her drafts, stating,

I write poems, but there is always something wrong with them. They never quite say what I mean them to say, and then I think of how many good poems there already are in the world, and I realize that what I've written doesn't add very much to what's already been said (233).

Clara clearly connects deeply with literature as both a reader and a writer, and her identity is strongly connected with literary allusions. With this in mind, Wright's continued references to incomplete or inadequate literary texts actually created by Clara further emphasizes the point that although intertexts may attempt to reflect identity, they are always in some way insufficient or inadequate.

Multimodal intertextuality in *Clara Callan* not only acts as a potential reflection of identity, but also as a kind of restriction, outlining tropes which different characters can be associated with. The characters of Clara, Nora, and Evelyn are all heavily associated with different forms of media and have a distinct repertoire of intertextual allusions they draw from. While Clara most frequently references literature, Nora is most

closely associated with radio drama. In addition to her career as a radio actress, Nora is a personal consumer of and advocate for radio. Despite critiques from others, including Clara, Nora defends the radio industry against accusations that it presents a “simplified view of life” (Wright 2001, 157) and is merely “the sentiment business” (152). The radio industry is frequently contrasted with literature in the novel, with Nora remarking, “not everybody enjoys reading, Clara, and that’s where radio can help” (66). Even Evelyn, who works as a scriptwriter for radio dramas, pokes fun at Nora’s superficial interests, writing to Clara, “I can’t get your sister to read anything but *Photoplay* magazine” (76). Allen writes, “authors of literary works do not just select words from a language system, they select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating, even phrases and sentences from previous literary texts and from the literary tradition” (2022, 11). Since Clara’s and Nora’s associations with distinct intertexts from different media are so heavily emphasized from the very start of the novel, the reader is immediately primed to transpose these intertextual allusions into assumptions about the characters’ identities. Wright raises the expectation in the reader that intertextual references say something meaningful about a character’s identity. However, Nora’s characterization throughout the course of the novel shifts away from the flighty, shallow stereotype of a radio actress, demonstrating that intertextual allusions can also work as a force which constricts one’s identity.

In spite of Clara’s very early comment that “Father used to say that Nora’s entire life was a performance” (Wright 2001, 3), Nora is repeatedly shown to be the more grounded and sensible of the two sisters. When Clara writes to Nora asking for help after she becomes pregnant the first time, Nora immediately takes charge and makes all the necessary arrangements, from purchasing Clara’s train ticket to securing an appointment for an abortion (69–70). She even writes to Clara, “don’t, for heaven’s sake, try to do anything yourself. None of those old wives’ tales or home remedies work and they can be dangerous. You need people who know what they are doing” (70). Nora falls easily into a maternal, organizational role, stepping outside the air-headed stereotype her intertextual references would seem to suggest. Additionally, Nora is perfectly aware of the role of silly younger sister that others expect from her. When explaining to Clara the premise of *The House on Chestnut Street*, she writes:

The younger sister Effie is always getting into trouble (usually men) and the older sister Alice is the wise one who dispenses advice and gets her sister and others out of jams. Now guess which part they are grooming your kid sister for? Wrong! I am going to play the *older* sister, so there! (12)

Nora’s awareness of how her relationship to radio engenders assumptions about her identity reflects the constricting role intertextuality sometimes plays in Wright’s novel. The conflicting ideas that intertextuality could be a reflection of identity or it could be a misleading stereotype which restricts genuine expressions of identity further the understanding that identity is something unstable and unrepresentable.

Nora and Clara are not the only characters connected to specific types of media. Evelyn is unique in the fact that her profession is that of a radio scriptwriter, and she has a personal love for literature, giving her important connections to both sisters. Evelyn is certainly more cynical than Nora about her work in the radio business and Clara in her affinity for literature, writing to Clara, "you ask what consoles me. [...] Good books, of course, and music and all the rest of that art stuff" (Wright 2001, 109). Evelyn's ability to move between the intertextual realms of literature and radio makes her a particularly interesting character in terms of how intertextuality frames her identity. However, similarly to Nora, working in the radio industry seems to restrict Evelyn's identity, rather than liberate her. She writes to Clara, "there is nothing on the radio and I'm too tired to read. Besides, I'm sick of words, the thousands of hackneyed ones I churn out each week, and even the other ones, better arranged in books by more talented people" (209). Rather than finding intertextual allusions a source of comfort (like Clara) or a stereotyping factor to be negotiated (like Nora), Evelyn seems to simply view intertexts for what they are: words. Describing Evelyn, Clara writes, "everything is grist to her mill as I suppose it is for anyone who writes, whether it's poetry or radio serials" (87). In the novel, intertextuality becomes mere grist for the mill of Evelyn's identity; her references do not help us understand her further, but they are simply pieces of information, devoid of connotation. This fits in nicely with the fact that towards the end of the novel she moves to Hollywood to pursue script-writing. Evelyn describes her life in California as decidedly void of celebrity glitz, writing to Clara, "you want a glimpse of my 'glamorous world'? Sometimes they allow us to unchain ourselves and go to the bathroom" (384). She describes her desk at the office as a "cell" multiple times, and her entry into the film industry does not result in any intertextual references to encapsulate her character. Rather, the movie industry functions for Evelyn much like literature and radio: it provides material to be recycled into scripts for further media. Wright uses the character of Evelyn to undercut the implications of associating certain characters with particular forms of media and specific intertextual references. By never allowing the reader to comfortably fall into a place where intertextuality can be used as a lens into who a character is or is not, *Clara Callan* showcases the futility of attempting to represent identity.

The final way in which intertextuality undermines representations of identity in the novel is through the blurring of the distinctions between reality and intertext. Plett writes,

in extreme cases [an intertext] exchanges its internal coherence completely for an external one. Its total dissolution makes it relinquish its beginning, middle and end. It loses its identity and disintegrates into numerous text particles which only bear an extrinsic reference (1991, 6).

In *Clara Callan*, one way this dissolution shows up is within the novel's fictional universe, when the lines between diegetic levels become blurred. One early example of

this is when Alice, Nora's character on the radio drama *The House on Chestnut Street*, becomes engaged. Despite the obviously fictional nature of the program, Nora still receives fan mail containing wedding gifts. She writes that the station has been receiving "presents too, believe it or not!!! Tea towels from a lady in Kentucky, bedsheets (imagine) from someone in Indiana. A creamer and sugar bowl from a listener in Toronto. It's crazy" (Wright 2001, 265). The boundaries between Nora and the character she plays on *The House on Chestnut Street* are frequently shown to be fluid, and the indistinct nature of where the internal intertext ends and text begins problematizes questions of identity and representation. When Nora wants to leave New York, she has to be written out of the script, which then requires her to conceal her plans so that news of her character's absence does not get out. Nora explains to Clara, "it's just that people take the program so seriously that we have 'to keep their illusions intact,' to quote E" (144). The fact that for some listeners the show has taken on the same significance as actual, external events confuses the line between, for example, the Nora in the studio and the Nora outside it. As Clara remarks after listening to *The House on Chestnut Street*, "it is Nora, of course, but then it isn't" (86). The instability Wright creates regarding where intertext begins and the characters' fictional reality ends contributes to the undermining of intertextuality as an accurate venue to understand a character's identity.

Additionally, *The House on Chestnut Street*'s fictional setting of Meadowvale seems to run in close parallel to Clara and Nora's hometown of Whitfield, Ontario. Evelyn says that "Nora talks so much about Whitfield that it has become Meadowvale for me" (Wright 2001, 209–210). Despite Evelyn having no firsthand experience with small town life, she is able to write about it extremely convincingly, and Whitfield's outward appearances of tranquility and vicious underbelly of small town gossip and conservatism are reflected in Meadowvale and what happens behind the scenes of the show. After visiting Whitfield for the first time, Evelyn writes to Clara:

But that village of yours? Are you sure I didn't invent it? It seems to me that I had pictured just such a place when I sat down to imagine 'Chestnut Street.' All those Uncle Jims and Aunt Marys behind their curtains, and I'll bet they are nearly as nice as mine! (290)

The continuous blurring of the lines between the novel's fictional reality and *The House on Chestnut Street* helps Wright complicate the relationship between intertextuality and identity.

Another very important instance of reality being blurred with intertextuality in the novel is Clara's relationship to an Englishwoman she sees in Rome. While visiting Keats's house during her vacation in Italy, Clara is drawn to their museum guide, "a tall homely Englishwoman" of a similar age to her whom she sees leave on a bicycle with her lover after their tour is over (Wright 2001, 173). Reflecting on the scene, Clara thinks: "This homely Englishwoman had triumphed over all our presumptions and

was now pursuing a life of romantic adventure, reminding me that things are never as they seem, and that in fact we know very little about the lives of others." (175) Despite being a very small moment in her trip to Rome, the Englishwoman continues to preoccupy Clara's thoughts and writings, becoming a symbol for the confounding of external expectations. When attempting to speak to the Women's Auxiliary in Whitfield about her trip, she can only focus on the image of the Englishwoman and her Italian lover, and has to leave the stage when she is unable to continue her talk. The story and significance Clara attributes to this small scene she witnessed between two strangers takes on the properties of a fictional story, which Clara references in a similar way to other works of literature. When describing her botched talk to the Women's Auxiliary to Evelyn, Clara writes:

Perhaps I just realized the sheer fatuity of what I was trying to do. [...] I suppose I began to laugh at the absurdity of trying to explain something that is perhaps unexplainable to certain people, and of course it all came out badly. I must have sounded hysterical. (211)

Clara's continuous references to this story she has constructed further distort the levels of text and intertext in the novel. By incorporating the story of the Englishwoman in Rome into her identity just as she does with various literary allusions, Clara effectively creates an intertext that only she (and the reader) have access to. However, unlike other works of literature which can function as points of connection for her and other characters (such as Evelyn), the fictionalized intertext of the Englishwoman in Rome is only accessible to Clara. This point is emphasized when Clara attempts to bring up the event to Nora later in the novel. Clara writes, "Nora shook her head. 'The things you notice, Clara! I don't remember any homely woman on a bicycle with a man'" (390–391). Not only is Clara unable to connect with Nora over the literature she uses to understand and frame her identity, but even a real, lived event the two sisters shared cannot function as a point of connection because of how Clara has intertextually incorporated it into her conception of herself. The various crossovers between *Clara Callan's* fictional reality and the intertextual references within the novel make it difficult to create a consistent framework to understand how intertexts and characters' identities work together. Because Wright uses intertextuality as a way to understand identity and simultaneously undermine the assumptions that come alongside specific intertexts of different media, the role of intertextuality as it relates to identity is unstable. Taken alongside the thematization of blurred boundaries between various intertexts and reality, what we would expect to be mutually exclusive ways of utilizing intertextuality come together in the novel to highlight the inadequacy of any textual representation of identity.

## Conclusion

*Clara Callan* is a novel rich in potential entries for literary criticism. Its historical setting, polyvocal structure, and thematization of the shifting culture of the interwar years offer many avenues along which it can be analyzed. Although epistolarity and intertextuality are two crucial components of the novel, there are many more paths of inquiry that this paper has left open. The heavily trope-dependent nature of Clara's relationship with Frank, cultural and national stereotypes about the US and Canada, and feminist readings of Clara's experience with rape and abortion are just a few of many potentially fruitful areas for research. Wright's epistolary structure and intertextual references color the story's themes in innumerable ways.

Sparling writes, "buffeted by chance and impelled by her own flawed personality, Clara is the quintessential Wrightian protagonist, faced with the need to (re)build a life suspended above a yawning abyss" (2019, 256). As Clara seeks to build and rebuild her life and her identity throughout the course of the novel, the reader is continuously forced to confront the question of who Clara Callan really is. Her identity, and the identities of Nora, Evelyn, and the novel's other characters, are perpetually shaped by the media they surround themselves with and the epistolary form they are restricted to. Clara's life is not only buffeted by chance, but by the multitude of influences marking her identity and making it impossible to represent it on the page. Wright's emphasis on disconnection and ambiguity in his use of mixed epistolarity and diverse intertextuality problematizes the idea that identity can ever be represented textually. Clara herself writes in her final diary entry, "I want so badly to help you realize, Elizabeth Ann, how difficult and puzzling and full of wonder it all is" (Wright 406). However, despite this impulse, Clara never was able to communicate a part of herself to those around her, and searching for an adequate representation of her identity in the pages of Wright's novel leaves a reader with far more questions than answers.

## References

- Abbott, H. Porter, 1984, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Allen, Graham, 2022, *Intertextuality*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London/New York: Routledge.
- Altman, Janet, 1982, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Bachmair, Ben, 2000, "Creator Spiritus: Virtual Texts in Everyday Life", in: Ulrike H. Meinhof and Jonathan Smith (eds.), *Intertextuality and the Media: From Genre to Everyday Life*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 115–131.
- Bower, Rachel, 2017, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980–2010*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frow, John, 1990, "Intertextuality and Ontology", in: Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 45–55.
- Kauffman, Linda, 1992, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Löschnigg, Maria/Rebekka Schuh, 2018, "Epistolarity: Theoretical and Generic Preliminaries", in: Maria Löschnigg/Rebekka Schuh (eds.), *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 15–43.
- MacArthur, Elizabeth, 1990, *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Plett, Heinrich, 1991, "Intertextualities", in: Heinrich Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 3–29.
- Sparling, Don, 2019, "Making a Life: Richard B. Wright, *Clara Callan* (2001)", in: Maria Löschnigg/Martin Löschnigg (eds.), *The Anglo-Canadian Novel in the Twenty-First Century*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 251–258.
- Wright, Richard B., 2001, *Clara Callan*, Toronto: HarperCollins.