

# Identity, Emotions, and Death: Interpreting Letter from an Woman from the Perspective of Biographical Criticism

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**Abstract:** Stephen Zweig's Letter from an Woman focuses on a long letter sent by a woman to unfold the story plot. Death is the prominent theme of the work, and highlighting the psychological activities of the characters is the author's realistic writing style. This work is set against the backdrop of the Nazi regime in 20th century Europe, and through imaginative reconstruction, it shapes the author's identity embodiment, emotional projection, and the world of yesterday; Completed the dialectical relationship between the author and oneself, with the group, with history and the era, between reality and illusion. This plays a role in rediscovering the author's subjectivity in biographical literature, providing valuable examples for its further development in the process of transformation.

**Keywords:** Stephen Zweig, Letter from an Woman, Biographical Criticism, Death.

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## 1. Introduction

Biographical criticism is one of the most practical and fundamental methods of literary criticism. It believes that the life of a work is bestowed by its author, and thus, the interpretation of a work should be based on the study of the author's biography, living conditions, creative experiences, and other aspects. A work can also reflect the author's thoughts, emotions, creative intentions, and expressed viewpoints, and thus, the study of a work can provide insights into the author as well. Biographical criticism explains a work based on the author's personal experiences, examines the style of the work based on the author's personality, studies the work based on the author's attitude towards the world, and interprets the work based on the author's creative intentions.[1] (P559) "Samuel Johnson's 'The Lives of the English Poets' connects the life of a writer with their works, arguing that the development of a writer's talent is closely linked to the era they lived in, thus pioneering biographical criticism." [2] (P115) The true pioneer of biographical criticism is arguably the French critic Sainte-Beuve, who proposed the method of "from the tree to the fruit" in his studies. He believed that the relationship between a writer and their works, akin to that of a tree and its fruit, follows a certain chronology. Writers come before their works; there is a causal relationship where the existence of the writer precedes the creation of the work. There is also a correspondence relationship, where a writer's style corresponds to the resulting works.

In "Letter from an Unknown Woman," the story of a woman's life is told through letters from a stranger, detailing her admiration for Mr. R from her youth until her death. By examining Mr. R's perspective on the letters, readers understand the story's content. Utilizing biographical criticism to interpret the novel, connecting it with the author's life experiences, allows for a better understanding of both the text and the author's thoughts and emotions.

## 2. Mr.R: Identity Avatar

"By paying attention to the portrayal of historical figures' characters, recording historical life scenes, dissecting details

of psychological and emotional lives, and highlighting the pivotal moments in events, with profound humanistic insights and delicate humane sympathy, we have opened up a new window to understand history and know historical figures." [3] (P60) Starting from Zweig's authentic personal journey can help readers better understand human nature, grasp the significance of history, and comprehend the meaning of life. Through his vivid life experiences and his reconstruction of historical figures, biography literature regains its value in understanding.

### 2.1. External Life

"Zweig believed that genuine autobiography art, like biography literature, essentially combines literature and history." [4] (P107) Interpreting this work through Zweig's life story can deepen our understanding of European history, as his novels "may better help us understand our current era." [5] (P419) In "Letter from an Unknown Woman," Zweig crafted Mr. R, who bears a resemblance to his outward identity. The Mr. R in the novel is a renowned novelist residing in Vienna, just returned from a short trip. In his autobiography, "The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European," the author writes: "I rented a small apartment in Vienna. But it was not my true residence, only a temporary resting place-Frenchmen like to put it so incisively, meaning that my life before the outbreak of the World War always had a kind of inexplicable transience." [6] (P177) Hence, it can be understood that the place where the author portrays Mr. R living is actually based on his own background, making Mr. R's living conditions similar to those of the author, Zweig.

In "The World of Yesterday," the author is portrayed as a collector, particularly of other people's manuscripts. In "Letter from an Unknown Woman," when Mr. R first moves in, there are "Indian Buddhas, Italian sculptures, and large, brightly colored oil paintings" described. [7] (p300) From the comparison, it can be seen that Mr. R and the author Zweig share similar lifestyles, characterized by wealth and a love of collecting things.

Through reading Zweig's "The World of Yesterday," it can be discovered that Mr. R shares a similar background with the

author Zweig. Zweig was born in Vienna; his father was a textile manufacturer who later became a millionaire, and his mother came from the internationally renowned Rothchild family. His family was filled with talented individuals, all proficient in several languages. Zweig realized early in his secondary education that "in every affluent household, 'educated' sons were carefully cultivated for their social status, taught French, English, and familiarized with music." [6] (P32). In the novel, it is immediately mentioned that Mr. R is a novelist who moves in with many books, including French and English ones. From his level of education, it can be inferred that Mr. R shares a similar educational background with the author. Therefore, Mr. R is the external embodiment of Zweig's identity.

Mr. R's appearance bears a striking resemblance to that of the author, Zweig. "At first glance, I saw your radiant, expressive face, adorned with a beautiful, glossy head of hair. My surprise was indescribable: indeed, you were so young, handsome, with a tall figure, agile movements, and debonair charm. I was truly taken aback." [7] (p302) Those who know and understand Zweig are aware that he himself was also handsome and tall. Therefore, Mr. R embodies the author's identity.

## 2.2. Personality Cultivation

Zweig's novels go beyond mere surface-level depiction and narrative. They delve into the protagonist's psyche, motivations, personality, and even delve into their innermost thoughts and privacy. [4] (P107) From the novel, it is evident that Mr. R is someone who enjoys freedom and unconstraint. This is expressed through the words of a stranger: "You're someone who can only breathe life in a state of freedom and unconstraint." [7] (p323) Furthermore, the novel portrays Mr. R as gentle, kind-hearted, and romantic, attracting visits from high-class individuals such as the opera house manager. In "The World of Yesterday," Zweig, similarly, was fond of freedom. He traveled to multiple countries and eventually settled in Brazil, where he had many famous friends, including French novelist and playwright Romain Rolland, French sculptor Auguste Rodin, and Maxim Gorky. Therefore, Mr. R and Zweig share similar preferences for outings, freedom, tenderness, and making friends.

In "The World of Yesterday," Zweig mentions having a temporary feeling when it comes to his relationships with female friends, akin to the irresponsibility of youth. This reflects Zweig as a person with a dual personality, much like Mr. R portrayed in "Letter from an Unknown Woman": "You have a dual personality, being both a frivolous, playful, adventure-loving young man, while at the same time being an incredibly serious, responsible, profoundly knowledgeable elder in the art you pursue." [7] (p302) Anyone familiar with Zweig would know of his profound love for art, his pursuit of it, his nostalgia for the artistic and musical hub of Vienna, and his longing for his spiritual home. Hence, Mr. R shares similarities with Zweig in terms of personality.

In "The World of Yesterday," Zweig depicts the widespread prevalence of prostitution in Europe at the time, stating: "Prostitution is the vaulted ceiling of the dark underground of bourgeois society, adorned with dazzling flawless facades above it. Today, it is rare to encounter prostitutes on the streets of major cities, much like it is rare to see carriages on the roads. However, in the past, women offering their services were everywhere on the sidewalks, and avoiding them was more difficult than finding them. Additionally, there were

many clandestine establishments such as all-night hotels, cabarets, dance halls with female partners and singers, and bars with call girls. At that time, women selling themselves were treated like commodities, openly offered for sale at different prices per hour; it took little time or effort for a man to purchase a woman, much like buying a pack of cigarettes or a newspaper, to enjoy for a moment, an hour, or a night." [6] (p269) Similar descriptions are also reflected in the novel, as seen in the passage: "You are willing to squander your emotions on everyone, on all people, but unwilling to make any sacrifices." [7] (p330) "I immediately realized that you didn't recognize me, didn't recognize the girl from back then, nor the girl I became later. Once again, you treated me as a new acquaintance, pursued me as if I were a stranger, and from your confident demeanor, I felt that you regarded me as a woman selling her smiles at night." [7] (p333) The descriptions in the text are sufficient to illustrate Mr. R's actions mirroring the experiences of the era in which the author, Zweig, lived. By intertwining his own life experiences, the author shapes the identity of Mr. R, using his perspective to help readers understand the history of Europe at that time and the dark realities lurking beneath its dazzling facade.

## 3. Strange Woman: Emotional Projection

Zweig's novel "is primarily themed around 'emotions, passion-lust, and women,' portraying various complex and rich emotional activities and psychological states through the depiction of characters' inner worlds." [8] (P207).

In the work, not only is Mr. R a more specific, direct, and easily understood embodiment and projection of Zweig's identity, representing his outward self, but the depiction of the Strange Woman is also Zweig's more metaphorical and indirect way of using gender interchange to make the unfamiliar woman the emotional projection of the writer. This emotional projection is more passionate, more secretive, harder to discern, and deeper. The Strange Woman becomes another, more internal self of the writer. The portrayal of the Strange Woman is Zweig's objective description of the women surrounding him when he was at the height of his success, and it is his commentary on human nature through the perspective of women. "Zweig observes reality and criticizes society from the perspective of upholding humanity, thus he advocates and praises the understanding, sympathy, love, forgiveness, and spirit of sacrifice between people." [9] (P114).

### 3.1. An emotional Projection of the Inner Self

The Strange Woman expresses her admiration and unwavering loyalty to Mr. R through letters. Her letters enable Mr. R to reminisce about the beautiful moments they shared in the past. Her love for Mr. R does not fade with time but remains steadfast. When she was just thirteen years old, Mr. R was a significant figure to her, and she observed his every move. His presence changed her, leading her to excel in her studies and music to impress him. Her love for Mr. R was pure and fervent. When the beautiful eighteen-year-old maiden returned to Vienna, Mr. R became her eternal dream, causing her emotions to fluctuate. She experienced repeated disappointments and hopes in love and desire. After becoming pregnant and giving birth, Mr. R became her everything, and she transferred her love for him to their child—a surrogate for Mr. R. She dedicated herself to raising the child she longed

for, striving to provide a better, happier life for him, even becoming the mistress of a wealthy family for the sake of their child. "I do not wish to tie myself down; I want to keep myself free for you at all times." [7](p329) For Mr. R, she gave up a carefree and affluent life and waited. Later, she met Mr. R again at a ballroom, where she was as infatuated with him as before, only to be treated by him as a nightclub prostitute. She left with disappointment and pain, which stayed with her until her death.

The relentless love of the Stranger Woman actually represents the author's attempt to uphold purity in a world filled with disappointment. Even if one ends up disillusioned with the world, the idea is to follow one's heart passionately and without regret, akin to the Stranger Woman's demeanor of passion and disappointment. She, pure and gentle, perseveres in her love for Mr. R until the end, but cannot escape a tragic fate. Similarly, the author, persistent in his ideals, ultimately succumbs to suicide. Mr. R's neglect of the Stranger Woman reflects the world's abandonment of the author. This group, symbolized by the Stranger Woman, is being forsaken by the world they love. In the novel, the portrayal of the Stranger Woman's actions predominantly conveys respect for women. Zweig affirms himself by affirming the Stranger Woman, experiencing two world wars as a witness of his time. His spiritual home is destroyed, and cultural regimes collapse. Just as Mr. R abandons the Stranger Woman, so does the world abandon itself. Therefore, Zweig chooses suicide as a testament to his freedom, dying as a cultural exile. The dissonance between idealism and reality triggers his spiritual crisis. When the world forsakes him, he, too, despairs and leaves. His pursuit of a spiritual home dissipates in exile, and he reconstructs the world of yesterday through sentimentality and imagination.

### 3.2. The Metaphor of Love

"The pursuit of love's freedom symbolizes the natural inclination of human beings, representing a genuine mutual affection devoid of any utilitarian motives." [10](P136) This is precisely reflected in the Stranger Woman's view of love towards Mr. R. In the work, love becomes a metaphor for past happy lives. The Stranger Woman's obsession with eternal love symbolizes the author's eternal pursuit of artistic ideals, longing for a peaceful and beautiful life, and hopes for the revival of European civilization. Her reminiscence of a love she obsessed over for a lifetime but could never attain also mirrors the author's memories of the peaceful world of his childhood and the pre-World War I era of peace and happiness—a world that can never be regained. It is Zweig's final reminiscence of the world, echoing the memories of the Stranger Woman in his work "The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European".

The death of the Stranger Woman signifies the purity of love; her demise completes the essence of love. Her death subtly hints at the collapse of Zweig's spiritual world, the vanishing desire for the once beautiful world, and the concern for the future and destiny of European civilization. It illustrates the author's disappointment and disillusionment with the current era, his sorrow at being unable to alter the present world, and the pain of being unable to lead a better life in this world.

Compared to her pure love, Mr. R's affection is a transaction of capital. This alienated love dynamic plunges their relationship into a mechanized, fixed pattern. The author critiques such relationships, where the purity of love between

individuals is commodified in the capitalist era, leading to the spiritual alienation and psychological distress of those living in this capitalist age.

After completing "The World of Yesterday," Zweig ended his own life. However, in his despair, the author instills hope for future generations, hoping for the betterment of Western civilization. He wishes that the mission he couldn't fulfill would be completed by those who come after him, believing that the new era, after the pain of hell and the trials of purgatory, will surely be more brilliant and civilized.

## 4. The Son's Death: Saving Yourself

In Zweig's autobiography "The World of Yesterday," he imaginatively reconstructs a world intertwined with tranquility and freedom, joy and sadness. The author projects the childhood era he desperately wants to preserve onto his son; thus, the son becomes a reincarnation of the world of yesterday. The son's death represents Zweig's escape from the void of the future world, the only remedy to save himself.

### 4.1. Yesterday's World

The son, as the love child of the woman and her beloved Mr. R, represents the only remaining love she can touch, the happiness she can grasp and hold in her hand. "At this moment, the flu is spreading from house to house. If I were to catch the flu, then I could depart with my child." [7](p297) The flu took away the child whom the woman had poured half her lifetime's effort into, snatching away this son who brought hope, vitality, sunshine, and conveyed vitality. She could only helplessly bid farewell to this world. The phrase "My son died yesterday" appears three times in the text. [7](P255) The progression of the plot plays a crucial role. The first mention of the child's death sees "I" losing the last remaining hope and confessing "my" realization of "your" affection. The second mention of the child's death finds "I" constantly thinking of "you" amidst Bruce's loneliness and finally reaching "your" side. The third mention of the child's death informs "you" that it's your own flesh and blood and acknowledges "my" understanding of "your" love for freedom, raising the child alone. The son's death signifies the death of her love and, more importantly, the end of her agony. In the form of death, she fulfills her own love.

In "The World of Yesterday," it is said: "The shadow of war will spread over our entire era, never to disappear from me; the shadow of war covers every thought of mine day and night." [6](P480) The flu, indirectly speaking, is akin to war, causing more deaths and bringing about immense catastrophe for humanity, ultimately destroying European civilization. For Zweig, the "son" living through the war represents the elusive nostalgia for the golden age of yesterday and the childhood haven of tranquility; it embodies the peaceful society in Europe before the war. The death of the son, for Zweig, epitomizes the liberal belief that permeated his entire life—it is his way of achieving spiritual freedom, bidding farewell to the world in death, much like the unknown woman.

### 4.2. The World of the Future

The son metaphorically represents the world of yesterday, and his death suggests the author's self-fulfillment through death, reshaping spiritual freedom through the demise of the physical body. "The pale horses of the Book of Revelation have all galloped through my life: revolution and famine, currency devaluation and terror, epidemic diseases and political exile. I have witnessed firsthand the emergence and

spread of various mass movements-Italian fascism, German National Socialism, Russian Bolshevism-especially the incurable plague of nationalism, which has poisoned the flower of our European culture." [6](P5) In this passage, the author condemns the destructive impact of narrow nationalism on the Jewish people, on the lives of European people, and on European civilization. Zweig evaluates himself: "I, as an Austrian, a Jew, a writer, a humanitarian, and a pacifist, happen to stand in the epicenter of this earthquake." [6](P32) As an Austrian, his country had been annexed. As a Jew, his people suffered at the hands of Nazi perpetrators. As a writer, his books were seized and banned by Hitler. As a humanitarian and pacifist, he witnessed the destruction of World War I and World War II. Today's era is already on a path of destruction, let alone the world of the future, for which the author harbors no hope. Such times are fraught with emptiness, depression, and desolation, following him in his life of exile. In Zweig's understanding, "personal freedom is the greatest wealth." [6](P72) In the world ravaged by fascist wars, freedom, humanity, and peace have long become void. In this emptiness, true freedom cannot be established. Even in exile, Zweig cannot shake off his concern for the European people. "I believe that we must once again awaken the noble image of these great defeated ones, so that people can see those who suffered in the terrible movements of dictatorial tyranny." [11](P354) He also cannot let go of his concern for his persecuted compatriots in the midst of war.

So he escapes the alienated world as if through the death of a son, criticizing the corruption of the bourgeoisie, the distortion and deformation of the human spirit by capitalist industrialized mechanical labor. Zweig sees death as the only remedy to rescue oneself: the idea that while life brings suffering, death brings freedom triumphs over despair. "Zweig rejects the irrational logic of the wartime era through suicide, freeing himself from the frenzy and brutality," [12](P98) he escapes pain through death, achieving inner tranquility, and attaining the eternal and immortal essence of life.

## 5. Peroration

Connecting his works with his autobiography, Mr. R can be seen as a representative of men in the patriarchal society of that time; he is the kind of debonair man who treats love casually; he represents a blend of the author's personal experiences and those of the social group. This portrayal encompasses both criticism and reflection, as well as revealing aspects of society's reality. Similarly, Zweig's life mirrors that of a stranger, driven by an ultimate pursuit

culminating in self-sacrifice through death. By shaping the image of a sacrificial and pure stranger, he redefines himself, seeking the virtues of kindness and purity within; through the pursuit of the perfect woman in love, he aims to change the alienated love, alienated humanity, and alienated world of his time. However, faced with a world ravaged by fascism, he understands that whether it is the beautiful times of yesterday or the hopeful world of the future, everything will end in death and begin anew with death.

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