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AUTOFICTION IN A DECAYING WORLD: TEMPORALITY, UNCERTAINTY, AND NARRATIVE POWER IN DODIE SMITH'S *I CAPTURE THE CASTLE*

Метою статті є визначення наративних механізмів письмового самотворення у романі Доді Сміт *I Capture the Castle* з акцентом на автофікційність та темпоральність як ключові художні засоби формування ідентичності в умовах культурного, історичного та екзистенційного занепаду. У статті розглядається роман крізь призму сучасної теорії автофікшн, поєднуючи її з наратологічними та феміністськими *підходами* до аналізу, з метою виявлення того, як хронотопічна структура, щоденникова форма і наративна невизначеність слугують інструментами трансформації жіночого суб'єкта.

В умовах занепаду старого соціального порядку й домінування патріархальних наративів, головна героїня роману – Кассандра Мортмейн – використовує письмо як спосіб осмислення власного буття у хаотичному світі. У тексті простежується складна динаміка між фікційним і автобіографічним «я», де акт письма стає не лише формою оповіді, а й практикою виживання, формою самоаналізу та спробою повернення наративного контролю над дійсністю, що втрачає структуру. Таким чином, твір Сміт постає як ранній приклад англомовного автофікшн, у якому поєднано щоденникову документальність із художньою рефлексією.

Актуальність дослідження полягає у необхідності поглибленого переосмислення літературних форм жіночого письма у XX ст., зокрема у контексті новітніх досліджень з темпоральності, травматичної пам'яті, літератури «я» та постструктуралістського аналізу суб'єктивності. Попри значний внесок *I Capture the Castle* у розвиток наративної техніки та жіночої літературної традиції, роман досі залишається недостатньо вивченим у межах наукової дискусії про автофікшн.

Методологічна база дослідження спирається на поєднання герменевтичного аналізу, постструктуралістської теорії суб'єкта (зокрема, Жака Дерріда та Джудіт Батлер), наратології (Жерар Женет, Пол Рікер), а також сучасної теорії автофікшн (Серж Дубровський, Філіп Віллер). Особливу увагу приділено щоденниковому жанру як медіуму саморефлексії та літературній практиці інсценування письмового «я».

Результати дослідження доводять, що роман Доді Сміт демонструє складну структуру темпоральної нестабільності, де фрагментарність і ретроспективність не лише відображають психологічний стан героїні, але й створюють простір для конструювання ідентичності в опозиції до руйнації зовнішнього світу. Письмо Кассандри набуває функції катарсису, реконструкції, а подекуди – симуляції досвіду, що втілює суто автофікційний жест: поєднання реального і вигаданого як засобу збереження власної цілісності. Така перспектива дозволяє інтерпретувати роман *I Capture the Castle* як текст, у якому наративна темпоральність і жанрова гібридність формують літературну суб'єктивність, що протистоїть як екзистенційній загрозі, так і культурній амнезії.

Ключові слова: автофікшн, наративна темпоральність, щоденниковий дискурс, письменницьке «я», жанрова гібридність, письмова ідентичність, феміністська критика, хронотоп занепаду.

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Introduction

Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1948) holds an uncertain place within the canon of twentieth-century English literature. Although the novel's accessible style has charmed readers, it conceals a sophisticated exploration of identity, memory, authorship, and time – issues often overlooked in critical studies. Such perceptions have obscured the novel's deeper structural and philosophical complexity. Beneath its accessible style lies a sophisticated exploration of identity, memory, authorship, and time – topics that resonate strongly with contemporary debates on life writing and autofiction. Specifically, the novel's unique temporal structure, marked by the non-linear unfolding of diary entries, directly shapes Cassandra's evolving selfhood. This fragmented chronotope challenges conventional notions of linear progression, mirroring the instability of both the protagonist's inner world and her external environment. Through her diary, Cassandra's engagement with time becomes a fundamental act of self-creation and a way to navigate a world in transition.

What appears simple at first conceals a layered structure shaped by fragmented scenes, reflective narration, and shifting perspectives. Cassandra Mortmain's diary is more than a record of daily events; it serves as a space where she shapes and reworks her sense of self in response to a deteriorating social environment. The castle's crumbling walls and the family's fading aristocratic status symbolise a broader cultural decline in Britain before and after the Second World War.

Within this atmosphere of loss and ambiguity, writing becomes Cassandra's way to find meaning and maintain a sense of control in a changing world. While some feminist readings exist, the novel has not yet been thoroughly reconsidered in light of recent developments in narrative theory, life writing, and autofiction. Its blend of confession, self-aware narration, and mixed genre features foreshadows the works of later writers like Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Deborah Levy, but this connection remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge that gap by situating *I Capture the Castle* within a tradition of narrative self-exploration that it quietly anticipated.

This article offers a fresh reassessment of *I Capture the Castle* as an early example of autofiction that skillfully combines diary writing, flexible time structures, and reflections on self-expression. *The aim* of the article is to identify the narrative mechanisms of written self-creation in Dodie Smith's novel *I Capture the Castle*, with a focus on autofiction and temporality as key artistic devices in shaping identity amid cultural, historical, and existential decline.

Cassandra's diary is not simply a transparent record of her life; instead, it is an active space where her sense of self is formed, questioned, and constantly revised.

The study has four *objectives*:

– to examine how the novel's treatment of time shapes Cassandra's identity;

– to explore the diary as a blended literary form that allows for genre experimentation and personal storytelling;

– to investigate how gender, class, and authorship influence Cassandra's written self;

– to position the novel within a wider context that connects it to modern and contemporary works of women's autofiction.

This study does not rely on rigid research questions but instead follows the main tensions that shape the novel's exploration of selfhood. At the heart of this reading is the idea that identity in *I Capture the Castle* is not discovered but built through narration. Writing becomes the ground where Cassandra's sense of self is expressed, questioned, and temporarily stabilised. Her diary acts as a site where the lines between memory and imagination blur and are constantly renegotiated.

Cassandra's narrative voice reflects this fluidity. She often revises her thoughts, changes her perspective, or wonders how her words might appear to a future reader. Her writing is not just a record but an ongoing process of creating and editing her own story. This happens within a fragmented timeline, where present events are reinterpreted in light of past memories and imagined futures. The decaying castle deepens this theme: it represents both physical ruin and the instability of Cassandra's own world, highlighting how storytelling becomes a way to cope with uncertainty.

At the same time, the diary can be read as a subtle form of resistance. As a young woman with limited power, Cassandra uses writing to claim agency and shape her own voice in a world

that often dismisses it. In doing so, she enacts a quiet form of feminist self-making that values openness and complexity over neat conclusions.

The following analysis uses an interdisciplinary perspective that draws from *narrative theory, feminist criticism, and studies of autofiction*. Key ideas from thinkers like Paul Ricoeur, Gérard Genette, Judith Butler, and Serge Doubrovsky help shape the main arguments. This approach combines broad theoretical insights with close reading of the text to show how *I Capture the Castle* engages with questions of time, voice, and self-writing.

Rather than presenting a strictly linear discussion, the structure of this article mirrors the novel's own circular and reflective style. Themes such as shifting time, ambiguity, and identity appear in different sections, each time viewed through a slightly different lens. This flexible structure is meant to highlight how the novel stages these tensions rather than resolving them outright.

Overall, *I Capture the Castle* is treated here not as a sealed narrative with singular meaning, but as a text that actively invites diverse readings. By examining it in this way, the study shows how Dodie Smith's novel anticipates modern conversations about self-representation, genre mixing, and women's narrative voices.

Literature Review

Early critical reception of *I Capture the Castle* (1948) tended to emphasise its surface charm, comedic episodes, and romantic appeal, often categorising it as a light domestic novel or even a precursor to the "young adult" genre. Contemporary reviewers, such as those cited in *Kirkus Reviews* [Muchnick, 2012], praised its wit and warmth but rarely interrogated its formal innovations or thematic depth. This reductive framing persisted for decades, contributing to the novel's marginalisation in scholarly discourse despite its enduring popularity.

In recent years, critical attention has shifted towards recognising the novel's structural sophistication and its negotiation of modernist and postmodernist techniques. Wolfsohn's [2023] study interrogates the text's temporal layering, interiority, and reflexive narration, arguing for its hybrid position between late modernism and middlebrow realism. Stewart's [2008] analysis situates Cassandra's diary within modernist memory-work, showing how the text interrogates nostalgia while maintaining a realist surface. This reclassification aligns with Humble's [2001] broader reassessment of mid-century women's fiction as a site of formal experimentation beneath ostensibly accessible prose.

The diary form has been central to critical readings of the novel. Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography* [2001] and Steedman's *Past Tenses* [1992] provide theoretical frameworks for understanding Cassandra's journal as a performative space where identity is constructed through narrative. Building on this, Szirák's (2023) *Girlhood as Storytelling and (Anti-)Creation* examines Cassandra's authorial agency as a form of "god-like" creation, linking her imaginative control to biblical and patriarchal structures. The diary is thus both a record and a workshop – a point reinforced by Schama's [2012] observation that Smith originally wished the book to be published under Cassandra's name, underscoring the conflation of narrator and authorial persona.

Although the term "autofiction" post-dates Smith's novel, recent scholarship has begun to apply its conceptual lens to Cassandra's self-narration. Vilain's [2009] *L'autofiction en théorie* offers a theoretical basis for reading the diary as a hybrid mode, where the narrator constructs a fictionalised self that nonetheless mirrors authentic emotional experience. This perspective remains underdeveloped in *I Capture the Castle* studies, though it offers fertile ground for connecting the novel to later women's autofiction by authors such as Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti.

Ekphrasis – Cassandra's detailed verbal renderings of visual scenes – has received limited sustained analysis, despite its centrality to her cognitive and emotional ordering of experience. Hansen's [2024] *'A Pattern of Clothes': Fairy Tale, Originality, and Dress* foregrounds the novel's sartorial imagery, showing how garments function as narrative devices that mediate class aspiration, gender performance, and the tension between originality and cliché. This intersects with Hardyment's [2019] reading of the castle as a visual chronotope, where material decay becomes an organising metaphor for temporal and emotional states.

While Cassandra's wit is often acknowledged, its strategic deployment as a mode of feminist agency has been less thoroughly examined. Booth's [2023] *Cassandra Mortmain: Coming*

of Age situates the novel within the female Bildungsroman tradition, emphasising how irony enables Cassandra to negotiate patriarchal constraints without overt rebellion. This aligns with feminist narratology's interest in "double-voiced discourse" [Showalter, 1977], where humour and understatement mask subversive critique.

The castle itself has been read as both a literal and symbolic structure. Stewart [2008] and Hardyment [2019] note its function as a Bakhtinian chronotope, embodying temporal suspension, class decline, and the persistence of cultural memory. Its physical decay parallels the Mortmain family's social stagnation, while Cassandra's descriptions transform it into an aesthetic object, reframing deprivation as artistic resource.

Taken together, these studies reveal a novel far richer than its early reception suggested. It emerges as:

– a hybrid modernist-realist text that manipulates temporality through diary form;
– a proto-autofictional narrative where self-fashioning is inseparable from the act of writing;
– a work in which ekphrasis and material culture are integral to thematic development;
– a feminist intervention in narrative voice, using irony as a mode of resistance.

Yet gaps remain. There is scope for a sustained, integrated analysis that braids these strands – modernist temporality, diary poetics, visual/material aesthetics, and feminist irony – into a single interpretive framework. This article addresses that lacuna, demonstrating how Cassandra's ekphrastic precision and ironic self-awareness are not ornamental but constitutive of her identity formation in a world marked by both material decay and imaginative possibility.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework[1]

Autofiction: Definitions and Theoretical Trajectories

The term *autofiction* emerged in 1977 when Serge Doubrovsky [1977], in the paratext to his novel *Fils*, sought to name a form of writing that resisted the rigid boundaries of autobiography as then defined by Philippe Lejeune [1975]. Doubrovsky's [1977] neologism was both descriptive and polemical: it signalled a refusal to submit to the "referential pact" that underpinned traditional autobiography, while also claiming the freedom to fictionalise without abandoning the autobiographical frame. In his own words, autofiction was "fiction, of events and facts strictly real" – a paradox that foregrounded the tension between invention and verifiable truth.

From the outset, the concept was unstable. Was autofiction a sub-genre of autobiography, a branch of the novel, or a hybrid form in its own right? This ambiguity has persisted, making autofiction a productive site for theoretical debate. Its very resistance to neat categorisation mirrors the instability of the self it seeks to portray – a self that is at once lived, remembered, imagined, and narrated.

Smith and Watson [2010] situate autofiction within the broader field of life-writing, noting that all autobiographical acts are mediated by narrative strategies, cultural scripts, and the writer's positioning of self in relation to an audience. From this perspective, Doubrovsky's [1977] intervention can be seen as a formal acknowledgement of what life-writing theorists had long implied: that the autobiographical "I" is never a transparent transcription of lived reality, but a construct shaped by language, genre, and context.

Hyvärinen [2010] extends this argument by framing narrative identity as inherently dynamic and dialogical. In this light, autofiction is not merely a hybrid genre but a mode that foregrounds the instability of selfhood, making visible the processes of selection, omission, and invention that underpin all self-narration. This theoretical grounding is crucial for understanding how earlier works, such as *I Capture the Castle*, can be read through an autofictional lens despite predating the term.

Lejeune's [1975] *Le pacte autobiographique* established the foundational criteria for autobiography: the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist; the use of the author's real name; and an implicit truth-claim. While Lejeune [1975] initially viewed autofiction as a contradiction in terms, his later work on diaries, letters, and hybrid forms acknowledged that self-narratives often blur the line between documentation and invention.

1 Note: The article follows British English conventions; however, quoted material from the original U.S. edition of I Capture the Castle preserves American spelling for accuracy.

Philippe Vilain [2005], writing in the early twenty-first century, reframed autofiction as a mode that privileges invention and narrative play over strict factual accuracy. For Vilain [2005], the value of autofiction lies in its capacity to foreground the creative act of self-construction, rather than to disguise fiction as truth. Vincent Colonna [2004] similarly emphasises the performative dimension of autofiction, defining it as a sustained exploration of the "I" as a mutable, narratively constructed entity.

Manuel Alberca's [2007] notion of the "autobiographical pact of the liar" crystallises the paradox at the heart of autofiction: the simultaneous invocation and subversion of the autobiographical contract. Alberca [2007] invites the reader to inhabit a space of interpretive uncertainty, where the question is not whether the narrative is "true" but how truth and invention interact in the construction of the self.

Other critics, such as Jacques Lecarme [1993] and Philippe Gasparini [2008], have expanded the discussion by examining the reception of autofiction and its relationship to literary institutions, marketing, and readerly expectations. Gasparini [2008], in particular, has argued that autofiction's appeal lies in its capacity to engage the reader's desire for authenticity while simultaneously undermining it.

Eakin [1999] adds another dimension by arguing that the autobiographical self is always relational, formed in dialogue with others and with cultural narratives. This insight aligns with Colonna's [2004] emphasis on the performative "I" and suggests that autofiction's oscillation between sincerity and invention mirrors the way identity is negotiated in lived experience.

The rise of autofiction in the late twentieth century cannot be separated from broader intellectual and cultural shifts. Poststructuralist critiques of authorship and referentiality – articulated by Barthes [1977] in *The Death of the Author* and by Foucault [1979] in "What Is an Author?" – destabilised the notion of a coherent, transparent self that could be faithfully inscribed in autobiographical form. Derrida's [1976] deconstruction of presence and meaning further eroded the idea of unmediated self-representation.

At the same time, feminist, queer, and postcolonial theorists foregrounded the politics of self-representation, emphasising that identity is mediated by discourse, ideology, and cultural norms. Life-writing became a site for negotiating visibility, agency, and resistance. Autofiction, with its capacity to accommodate fragmentation, contradiction, and multiplicity, proved particularly suited to these aims. It could stage the self as both subject and object, both narrator and character, both witness and invention.

Smith and Watson [2010] note that the late twentieth century also saw a shift in publishing and readership patterns, with memoir and hybrid forms gaining commercial and critical prominence. This cultural moment created fertile ground for autofiction to flourish, as readers became increasingly attuned to – and tolerant of – the interplay between fact and fiction.

Hyvärinen [2010] situates this development within a broader "narrative turn" in the humanities and social sciences, in which personal narratives became a key site for exploring identity, ethics, and epistemology. Autofiction's emergence can thus be read as both a product of and a contributor to this intellectual climate.

The diary occupies a distinctive position within life-writing. Traditionally associated with private, chronological self-documentation, it is also a literary form that can be highly crafted. Lejeune's [1975] work on diaries highlights their dual temporality: they are written in the unfolding present yet are always already mediated by the writer's awareness of a potential audience – whether real, imagined, or future. This dual address makes the diary an ideal vehicle for autofictional experimentation.

In literary practice, the diary allows for selective emphasis, strategic omission, and retrospective reframing. It can oscillate between recording events and reinterpreting them, between documenting the self and inventing it anew. This aligns closely with Colonna's [2004] emphasis on the continuous reinvention of the "I" and with Alberca's [2007] recognition of the diary's potential to both claim and undermine truthfulness.

Eakin [1999] observes that diaries, like other autobiographical forms, are shaped by the writer's sense of audience, even when ostensibly private. This imagined readership can influence tone, content, and self-presentation, reinforcing the diary's status as a performative space. Smith and Watson [2010] similarly argue that diaries are sites of "self-fashioning," where the writer experiments with identity in ways that anticipate the strategies of autofiction.

Hyvärinen [2010] adds that the diary's episodic structure allows for shifts in narrative voice and perspective, making it particularly suited to representing the fluidity of selfhood. This structural flexibility mirrors the temporal and perspectival play that characterises much autofiction.

While *I Capture the Castle* predates the formal theorisation of autofiction, it exhibits narrative strategies that resonate strongly with the genre's later developments. Cassandra Mortmain's diary blends confession with performance, sincerity with invention, and immediacy with retrospective shaping. The result is a narrative that invites the reader to question the stability of the self being presented.

The retroactive application of the term autofiction to earlier works is contested. Purists, following Doubrovsky's [1977] original definition, restrict the label to texts in which the author, narrator, and protagonist share a name and identity. Others, including Colonna [2004] and Alberca [2007], adopt a more flexible, transhistorical approach, identifying autofictional elements wherever a text engages in sustained self-reflexivity, blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, and foregrounds the act of narration as a site of identity construction.

Smith and Watson [2010] support this broader view, noting that the tools of autofictional analysis can illuminate earlier texts that share its narrative strategies, even if they lack its formal markers. Eakin [1999] likewise argues that the relational and performative

Narrative Time and Identity: Genette, Ricoeur, Bruner

The treatment of narrative time in *I Capture the Castle* is integral to understanding how Cassandra Mortmain constructs and negotiates her evolving sense of self. The diary form inherently privileges a flexible, subjective engagement with temporality, enabling the narrator to fragment, reorder, and reinterpret her experiences in ways that mirror her shifting identity. This temporal fluidity is not incidental but constitutive of the novel's exploration of selfhood, as the act of writing becomes a means of shaping, rather than merely recording, lived experience.

Gérard Genette [1980] provides a precise narratological vocabulary for analysing these temporal dynamics, particularly through his categories of order, duration, and frequency. Cassandra's diary entries rarely adhere to a strict chronological sequence; instead, they interweave recollected episodes, immediate impressions, and anticipatory projections, producing a layered narrative fabric. Genette's [1980] concept of anachrony – the disruption of chronological order through analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (foreshadowing) – is especially relevant here, as Cassandra's oscillation between past, present, and imagined future reflects the instability of her self-perception. The manipulation of duration – lingering over certain moments while compressing or omitting others – further underscores the selective, interpretive nature of her self-narration. Likewise, frequency – the repetition of events from different vantage points – allows her to re-evaluate earlier experiences, signalling an identity in flux.

Paul Ricoeur [1984] expands this structural perspective by emphasising that narrative is not merely a device for sequencing events but a mode of configuring human experience in time. His notion of emplotment describes how narrative weaves heterogeneous elements – actions, emotions, reflections – into a provisional coherence. In Cassandra's diary, this process is visible in her continual reinterpretation of earlier moments: she revisits memories, modifies her impressions, and tests alternative versions of her own story. Ricoeur [1984] stresses that such coherence is always provisional, open to revision as new experiences reshape the narrative arc. Cassandra's self-perception, therefore, remains in a state of ongoing formation, with each act of writing both consolidating and destabilising her sense of identity.

From a psychological standpoint, Jerome Bruner [1990] offers a complementary lens through his theory of *narrative identity*. Bruner [1990] argues that individuals construct their sense of self through the stories they tell about their experiences, selecting and organising events in ways that confer meaning. Cassandra's diary exemplifies this process: her voice shifts between playful irony and earnest reflection, oscillating between romantic fantasy and stark realism. These tonal shifts are not inconsistencies to be resolved but manifestations of the multiplicity inherent in narrative selfhood. Bruner's [1990] emphasis on the interpretive rather than purely representational function of narrative underscores the diary's role as a site of identity performance.

The spatial dimension of Cassandra's narrative further enriches this temporal analysis. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's [1981] concept of the *chronotope*, the castle itself becomes a sym-

bolic nexus where space and time intersect. Its gradual decay parallels Cassandra's precarious social standing and her ambivalent negotiation between tradition and modernity. The castle's physical spaces – the crumbling tower, the draughty rooms, the surrounding landscape – are imbued with temporal layers, functioning as repositories of memory and as stages for imagined futures. Within this dilapidated yet resonant setting, the diary becomes both a refuge and an experimental space where Cassandra tests the coherence of her identity against the flow of fragmented time.

Moreover, the interplay between narrative time and identity in *I Capture the Castle* aligns with broader theoretical insights into life-writing. Smith and Watson [2010] note that autobiographical acts are always mediated by temporal framing, with the narrator's present shaping the representation of the past. Hyvärinen [2010] similarly emphasises the *dialogical* nature of narrative identity, in which past events are continually re-interpreted in light of present concerns and future possibilities. Cassandra's diary embodies this dialogical temporality, as each entry is both a product of its moment and a re-negotiation of earlier self-portrayals.

In sum, *I Capture the Castle* demonstrates that narrative time is not merely a neutral backdrop for events but an active force in shaping selfhood. By combining Genette's [1980] narratological categories, Ricoeur's [1984] philosophical hermeneutics, and Bruner's [1990] psychological perspective – and by situating these within the spatial-temporal framework of Bakhtin [1981] – this reading emphasises that Cassandra's diary is a performative act in which memory, time, and imagination converge. The result is an identity that resists final closure, remaining perpetually open to revision and re-invention.

Feminist and Poststructuralist Thought: Butler, Moi, Derrida

A deeper understanding of Cassandra Mortmain's diary in *I Capture the Castle* emerges when the narrative is read through the lens of key insights from feminist and poststructuralist thought. Judith Butler [1990] offers one of the most influential frameworks for rethinking identity through her theory of *gender performativity*, which challenges the notion of a pre-discursive, stable self. For Butler [1990], gender is not an innate essence but is constituted through repeated social enactments embedded in language, gesture, and culturally sanctioned behaviours. These repetitions, while appearing natural, are in fact regulatory performances that sustain the illusion of a coherent gender identity.

Butler [1990] maintains that the self is not a pre-existing entity merely described by language but is continually produced within discourse. This insight is particularly relevant to Cassandra's diary, where the act of writing becomes a performative practice in itself. Each entry is not simply a record of an already-formed identity but an active site where identity is rehearsed, adjusted, and re-signified. The diary thus becomes a stage for the iterative enactment of selfhood, in which Cassandra experiments with different postures, tones, and narrative positions, revealing the constructedness of her gendered subjectivity.

Extending this critique of essentialism, Toril Moi [1985] argues that female subjectivity should not be understood as an innate quality but rather as a discursive position negotiated within specific cultural and historical contexts. Moi [1985] critiques both biologically deterministic and overly abstract accounts of "woman," insisting instead on the situatedness of female identity within intersecting structures of class, ideology, and representation. Cassandra's diary vividly illustrates this point. Although constrained by the expectations of her social class and the domestic roles available to her, she uses her writing to question, parody, and at times defy these limitations. The coexistence of irony and earnestness in her narrative voice highlights her awareness that identity – especially her sense of womanhood – is not passively inherited but actively constructed through storytelling.

This negotiation of identity aligns with Teresa de Lauretis's [1987] concept of "technologies of gender," which emphasises that gender is produced through representational practices, including literature. Cassandra's self-representation is mediated by the cultural narratives available to her, yet she also manipulates these narratives to carve out spaces of agency. In doing so, she participates in what Hélène Cixous [1976] would call *écriture féminine*: a mode of writing that disrupts patriarchal structures of meaning by foregrounding multiplicity, fluidity, and embodied experience.

Jacques Derrida's [1976] poststructuralist framework further illuminates the inherent instability of meaning in Cassandra's narrative. His concept of *différance* – the endless deferral and displacement of signification – suggests that language never delivers a final, stable meaning but instead generates a play of traces. In the diary, this is evident in Cassandra's tendency to revise her earlier assertions, to expose contradictions in her own thinking, and to leave certain questions unresolved. Derrida [1976] reminds us that any claim to an "authentic" self is always provisional, contingent on the shifting play of language and context.

Chris Weedon [1997] extends this insight into the realm of feminist theory, arguing that subjectivity is constituted through language and is therefore always open to change. Cassandra's diary entries exemplify this openness: they are provisional, revisable, and responsive to new experiences. The instability of her self-narration is not a flaw but a reflection of the poststructuralist understanding that meaning – and identity – is never fixed.

Bringing these perspectives together shows that *I Capture the Castle* anticipates central debates in feminist and poststructuralist theory. Through Cassandra's self-conscious narrative, Dodie Smith explores the limits of stable gender identity and narrative truth, portraying the self not as a fixed core but as an ongoing performance, continually revised and re-signified within the play of language and social expectation. By situating Cassandra's diary alongside Butler's [1990] performativity, Moi's [1985] critique of essentialism, and Derrida's [1976] deconstruction of meaning – and by drawing on de Lauretis [1987], Cixous [1976], and Weedon [1997] – the novel emerges as more than a charming coming-of-age story. It becomes a subtle precursor to theoretical questions that would shape literary and cultural criticism in the decades that followed, offering a fictional laboratory in which the instability of identity and the politics of representation are both enacted and interrogated.

Genre Theory: Diary Novel, Autofiction, and Hybrid Form

The generic status of *I Capture the Castle* occupies a liminal yet productive space between the diary novel, early formulations of autofiction, and hybrid narrative modes that resist rigid classification. Traditionally, the diary novel has been understood as a genre that foregrounds intimacy, immediacy, and the apparent authenticity of private self-representation, often unfolding in near-real time. Philippe Lejeune [2009] identifies the diary's defining features as its dated entries, its sequential structure, and its claim to capture the flux of lived experience as it happens. Cassandra Mortmain's narrative aligns with these expectations insofar as it presents a chronological sequence of entries and records fluctuating moods, shifting perceptions, and evolving emotional insights. Yet, as Lejeune [2009] also notes, the diary novel is never a neutral transcript of life: it is a crafted artefact, shaped by selection, omission, and rhetorical framing.

This tension between apparent immediacy and conscious construction aligns with characteristics later attributed to autofiction. Serge Doubrovsky's [1977] original definition of the term emphasised the paradox of presenting "real" events and truths within a fictional framework. Although Dodie Smith's novel predates this terminology, Cassandra's diary demonstrates a similar layering of confession and invention. She performs authenticity while consciously shaping her story for an imagined future reader, thereby enacting what Vincent Colonna [2004] would later describe as the continuous reinvention of the "I." Philippe Vilain's [2005] description of autofiction as occupying a "neither-nor" space between autobiography and fiction provides a useful lens here, allowing us to see Cassandra's voice as a fictional construct that simulates intimacy while resisting fixed identity.

The text's refusal to conform to a single generic label reflects wider debates in genre theory regarding the hybridity and permeability of literary forms. Mikhail Bakhtin's [1981] conception of the novel as inherently dialogic and open-ended situates *I Capture the Castle* within a tradition of genre disruption and innovation. Cassandra's diary shifts fluidly between domestic comedy, romantic fantasy, psychological reflection, and socio-cultural critique. This formal versatility mirrors the thematic instability at the heart of the novel: Cassandra's self is under construction, the castle is in decline, and the future is uncertain. Bakhtin [1981] reminds us that the novel's openness to multiple voices and discourses makes it uniquely suited to representing such instability.

Tzvetan Todorov [1975] has argued that genres function not as fixed containers but as dynamic systems shaped by historical and cultural conditions. In this sense, *I Capture the Castle*

enacts Todorov's [1975] principle by blending life-writing with fictional narrative, realism with fairy-tale elements, and romantic tropes with a sharp awareness of social decay. This formal hybridity anticipates the innovations of contemporary women's autofiction, where diary, confession, and experimentation coalesce to explore unstable and resistant modes of female subjectivity. John Frow [2006] similarly emphasises that genre is not merely a classificatory tool but a framework of expectations and interpretive strategies; Cassandra's diary plays with these expectations, alternately fulfilling and subverting them.

Ralph Cohen [1986] and Alastair Fowler [1982] have both stressed that genres evolve through processes of combination and transformation. In this light, Smith's novel can be read as a site of generic negotiation, where the diary form absorbs and reconfigures elements from romance, social realism, and the Künstlerroman. Nancy K. Miller [1992] has shown how women's life-writing often engages in such hybridisation as a means of resisting the constraints of dominant literary forms. Cassandra's diary participates in this tradition, using the flexibility of the diary novel to accommodate multiple registers - from the whimsical to the critical – and to articulate a female subjectivity that is provisional, self-aware, and resistant to closure.

Framing Smith's novel through genre theory reveals that its power lies in its refusal to stabilise identity or meaning through traditional literary forms. The diary structure, infused with fictional strategies and layered narrative reflexivity, enables a generically hybrid text that challenges both gendered conventions and genre boundaries. In this respect, *I Capture the Castle* joins a lineage of women's writing that uses form as a site of subversion, reinvention, and aesthetic autonomy. By situating the novel within the intersecting frameworks of Lejeune's [2009] diary theory, Doubrovsky's [1977] and Vilain's [2005] accounts of autofiction, and Bakhtin's [1981] and Todorov's [1975] models of genre, we can appreciate its formal innovation as inseparable from its thematic exploration of identity, creativity, and social change.

Methodological Tools: Hermeneutics, Narratology, Comparative Analysis

This study adopts a multi-dimensional methodological framework that combines hermeneutic interpretation, narratological analysis, and comparative contextualisation to explore the formal and thematic complexities of *I Capture the Castle*. This pluralistic approach enables a reading attentive both to the narrative's structural intricacies and to its place within the broader tradition of life-writing and early autofiction. By integrating interpretive, structural, and comparative perspectives, the analysis can address the novel's layered engagement with questions of identity, temporality, and genre.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, especially as articulated by Paul Ricoeur [1981], underpins the interpretive dimension of this study. Ricoeur's [1981] notion of the **hermeneutic arc** describes the interpretive movement from naïve understanding to critical distance and finally to a deepened comprehension. Applied to Cassandra Mortmain's diary, this framework foregrounds the text not as a transparent record but as a layered site where language simultaneously reveals and obscures selfhood. Cassandra's diary entries demonstrate how memory, experience, and imagination are constantly reinterpreted and revised, producing a self-portrait that is both intimate and mediated.

Hans-Georg Gadamer [2004] complements this approach with his emphasis on the *fusion of horizons*, whereby the interpreter's historical and cultural perspective interacts with that of the text. Reading Cassandra's diary through this lens highlights the interplay between the novel's 1940s socio-cultural context and contemporary theoretical concerns about gender, authorship, and self-representation. The hermeneutic process thus becomes dialogical: the text questions the reader as much as the reader questions the text.

This interpretive stance also draws on Linda Hutcheon's [1989] insights into *historiographic metafiction*, which foregrounds the constructedness of narrative while engaging with historical realities. While *I Capture the Castle* is not metafictional in the postmodern sense, its self-reflexive diary form invites a similar awareness of mediation, encouraging the reader to consider how narrative shapes – and reshapes – lived experience.

Narratology. Narratology provides a complementary structural lens for examining how the diary manipulates time, perspective, and narrative sequence. Gérard Genette's [1980] taxonomy of *order, duration*, and *frequency* clarifies how Cassandra's retrospective reflections,

anticipatory asides, and narrative digressions produce a richly layered temporal structure. Her use of anachrony – both analepsis and prolepsis – disrupts linear chronology, while variations in duration (lingering over certain moments, compressing others) reveal the selective nature of her storytelling.

Mieke Bal [1999] extends Genette's [1980] framework by emphasising the interaction between *fabula* (the chronological sequence of events) and *story* (the order in which they are presented). Cassandra's diary exemplifies this distinction: the fabula of her life unfolds in one order, but her narrative rearranges events to serve thematic and emotional purposes. This manipulation of sequence and emphasis underscores the diary's role as a crafted artefact rather than a neutral transcript.

Jonathan Culler [2000] further reminds us that narrative conventions shape readerly expectations. Cassandra's oscillation between immediacy and retrospection plays with these expectations, creating a dynamic in which the reader is continually re-oriented in time. This temporal play is not merely decorative; it is integral to the novel's exploration of identity as a process rather than a fixed state.

Comparative Analysis. A comparative dimension situates Smith's novel within the evolving context of women's autofiction and hybrid life-writing. Although *I Capture the Castle* predates the term "autofiction," its narrative strategies echo techniques in later works by Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Deborah Levy. Like Cusk's *Outline* [2014], Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* [2012], and Levy's *Things I Don't Want to Know* [2013], Smith's novel blurs the boundary between confession and fiction, using a first-person voice that is both intimate and self-consciously constructed.

This comparative perspective also draws on Nancy K. Miller's [1992] work on women's life-writing, which highlights the ways in which female authors use autobiographical forms to negotiate authority and self-definition. Cassandra's diary participates in this tradition, deploying the conventions of the diary novel to explore the tensions between private reflection and public performance. By placing Smith's work alongside later autofictional texts, we can trace a lineage of formal experimentation in which women writers use hybrid forms to resist reductive categorisation.

Moreover, comparative analysis underscores the novel's anticipatory qualities. Its blending of diaristic immediacy with novelistic shaping prefigures the strategies of contemporary autofiction, where the boundaries between lived experience and narrative artifice are deliberately blurred. This intertextual positioning enriches our understanding of *I Capture the Castle* as both a product of its time and a text that continues to resonate within current literary debates.

Integrated Methodology. Together, these methodological perspectives – hermeneutics, narratology, and comparative analysis – enable a reading that does justice to the diary's narrative sophistication and its place within a broader literary tradition. The hermeneutic approach illuminates the interpretive layers of Cassandra's self-representation; narratology reveals the structural mechanisms through which time and perspective are manipulated; and comparative analysis situates the novel within a continuum of women's life-writing and autofictional practice.

This integrated approach reveals *I Capture the Castle* not merely as a nostalgic coming-of-age narrative but as a complex narrative experiment, deeply engaged with questions of genre, time, and the cultural politics of self-representation. In doing so, it highlights Smith's novel as an anticipatory text whose narrative techniques continue to resonate within contemporary theories and practices of autofiction, affirming its place in the evolving canon of hybrid literary forms.

This study is structured around an interdisciplinary triad of *autofiction*, *temporality*, and *narrative identity*, supported by *feminist narratology* and *poststructuralist thought*. These concepts are not treated in isolation, but as *interconnected: autofiction* blurs the boundary between fiction and self-writing; *temporality* highlights how narrative shapes and unsettles the self across time; and *narrative identity* brings these dimensions together by showing how Cassandra's diary performs an ongoing construction of subjectivity. Each strand contributes to a unified analysis of the novel's epistemological, affective, and formal complexity (Fig.1).

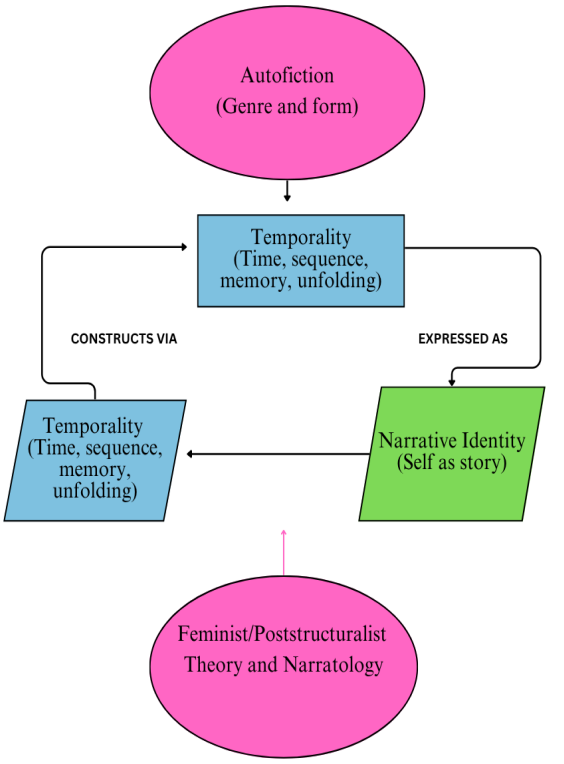


Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram: Interrelation of Key Theoretical Concepts

Analytical Section: Temporality, Identity, and Self-Narration

Temporal Structure of the Novel

Time in *I Capture the Castle* does not progress according to a straightforward, linear sequence of cause and effect. Instead, it unfolds in a non-uniform, recursive pattern guided by Cassandra Mortmain's inner logic and the inherently fragmented structure of her diary. Her narration is shaped less by external chronology than by the fluid rhythms of thought and feeling. Though each journal entry is dated, the intervals between them are inconsistent, and time is continually reshaped through reflection, anticipation, and narrative delay. For example, Cassandra demonstrates how past events spontaneously re-emerge, influencing her present thoughts, as she reflects: *"Suddenly the memory of that first time they came here flashed back to me. I hoped Rose had forgotten Simon's shadow looking like the Devil – I had almost forgotten it myself"* [Smith, 1948, p. 168]. This shows how memory isn't a neat, linear recall but a sudden "flashback" that brings previous perceptions like Simon's shadow back into the present moment, affecting her current concerns for her sister, Rose.

This flexible handling of time is more than a stylistic choice; it is central to how Cassandra perceives her world and defines her evolving sense of self. She frequently lingers over mundane yet emotionally charged details, expanding their narrative weight far beyond their objective duration. By contrast, whole days or weeks can be compressed into a few lines, their significance reduced by her shifting priorities. In this way, time becomes elastic: it is not dictated by the calendar but by memory, mood, and meaning. A striking example of this temporal layering occurs when she muses: *"All senses – and none of them" and I thought that perhaps if I made my mind a blank I have often tried – I once had an idea it was the way to foresee the future, but I never got any further than imagining blackness"* [Smith, 1948, p. 237]. Here, she recalls earlier attempts to predict the future while narrating in the present, folding past, present,

and imagined time into a single moment. This interplay underscores the diary's resistance to linear chronology and its role in shaping a self that is always in flux.

Cassandra's shifting tone, ironic commentary, and frequent narrative self-corrections reflect this dynamic: she rewrites her own story, revises past entries, and questions the truthfulness of her recollections. She effectively rewrites her own story, revises past entries, and questions the truthfulness of her recollections, as seen when she writes: *"While I have been writing I have lived in the past, the light of it has been all around me – first the golden light of autumn, then the silver light of spring and then the strange light, gray but exciting, in which I see the historic past"* [Smith, 1948, p. 37]. This passage illustrates how Cassandra's act of writing actively reconfigures her perception of time and memory, aligning with the idea of narrative as a dynamic, reconstructive process rather than a static record. In this sense, her diary exemplifies a performative mode of self-writing that anticipates what later critics would recognise as an autofictional stance.

Equally significant is her constant use of analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (anticipation). Cassandra often interrupts the immediate present to revisit past scenes or to imagine future possibilities, particularly when contemplating her family's precarious circumstances or her conflicted feelings for Simon. These narrative detours fragment any straightforward sense of the present and produce a richly layered temporal landscape in which her identity remains open-ended and provisional. Her internal state can profoundly affect her perception of the present, making ordinary interactions feel detached, as she describes: *"I went over and sat on the fender and talked about the weather; and then realized that I was making conversation as if to a stranger. It depressed me so much that I couldn't think of anything more to say"* [Smith, 1948, p. 41]. This specific moment, where she becomes acutely aware of her own "making conversation" rather than simply having it, reveals a temporal disjunction; her mind is already reflecting on her actions as they happen, creating a layered perception of time. The diary becomes not just a record but a space for description, interpretation, remembering, and imagining – often all within a single passage.

For instance, Cassandra demonstrates this fluid approach to time by jumping ahead in her thoughts and planning future interactions, as when she writes: *"I shall go through the front door to avoid meeting Stephen I really don't know how I can look him in the face after borrowing him as I have done. I will be brisk with him in future – I swear I will"* [Smith, 1948, p. 107]. This snippet shows her mind actively processing past actions *"borrowing him"* and projecting future behaviour *"I will be brisk,"* rather than simply recording present events.

The castle itself stands as a material embodiment of this temporal complexity. Its crumbling walls and faded grandeur evoke a past that still haunts the present, while its continued occupation by the Mortmain family signals an unresolved attachment to history despite economic decline. The castle thus acts as a chronotope – a place where time and space converge to shape the story's meaning. For Cassandra, its dilapidation mirrors her own experience of living suspended between lost certainties and an uncertain future.

This layered temporality is inseparable from Cassandra's ongoing self-construction. Her sense of self is not static but continually revised through the very act of writing. Earlier diary entries are sometimes contradicted, re-evaluated, or revisited with irony or regret, revealing a self in constant dialogue with its own past. In this way, the diary becomes a recursive text: each new entry reshapes what has come before and allows multiple versions of the narrator to coexist.

In resisting a strictly linear structure, *I Capture the Castle* aligns with broader modernist interests in the relationship between time, memory, and narrative voice. Yet, unlike more experimental modernist texts, it maintains a clear, engaging style. Cassandra's voice, while subjective and self-aware, remains accessible and emotionally vivid. The result is a hybrid temporal form: a narrative that reflects the fluidity of lived experience while also achieving aesthetic coherence. Through this subtle innovation, Dodie Smith presents time not as a passive backdrop but as a vital medium through which Cassandra's identity is imagined, rewritten, and sustained.

Diary as a Medium of Identity Work

In *I Capture the Castle*, the diary is far more than a neutral record of daily events; it is a generative medium through which Cassandra Mortmain enacts the continuous labour of shaping

and reshaping her identity. Through her diary, Cassandra Mortmain constructs a voice that is at once intimate and consciously shaped for an imagined audience, transforming lived experience into a curated narrative. For instance, she reflects on her process: *"… I keep closing my eyes and basking – that is, my body basks; my mind is restless. I go backwards and forwards, recapturing the past, wondering about the future – and, most unreasonably, I find myself longing for the past more than for the future"* [Smith, 1948, p. 187]. Here, Cassandra explicitly highlights her active role in shaping her narrative, suggesting a deliberate curatorial process rather than a straightforward recounting of events. Her diary blends confession with narrative performance, producing an impression of authenticity that complicates the boundary between real and imagined experience.

Rather than serving as a transparent window onto an already-formed self, the diary becomes a narrative space where selfhood is articulated, questioned, and repeatedly revised. This perspective aligns with poststructuralist and feminist views of life writing, which argue that identity is not an innate essence to be unveiled but a discursive construction shaped by language and narrative practice. Cassandra herself demonstrates this self-awareness about the act of writing and the potential for shaping her persona when she declares: *"Am I consciously naïve? Perhaps I am, perhaps this journal is. In future I will write it in stark prose"* [Smith, 1948, p. 64]. This metacommentary reveals her active engagement with her writing style and her self-perception, hinting at a deliberate performance within the diary.

Cassandra does not appear as a stable or unified narrator. Her diary exposes a fragmented, performative self, always negotiating with its own contradictions. She writes not only to record events but to interpret them, to test motives, and to imagine alternate possibilities. Hesitation, irony, self-correction, and narrative backtracking permeate her entries, signalling that the "I" is a shifting effect of discourse rather than a fixed identity.

In doing so, she experiments with how she wishes to be perceived, crafting an identity that is fluid and dialogical rather than fixed. An excellent example of this performative aspect is when she notes: *"I was most sympathetic with her own Father, but rather quick about it, because I wanted to write my journal. I only managed an hour before lunch but was able to work all afternoon, up in the attic"* [Smith, 1948, p. 131]. This revealing entry shows Cassandra consciously prioritising her writing, even over social interaction, highlighting how the act of journaling is central to her self-definition and the active construction of her identity.

This dynamic corresponds to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where identity emerges through iterative acts embedded in social norms. For Cassandra, each diary entry, each stylistic shift, and each reflective moment is an act of narrative performance. She experiments with different subject positions – romantic dreamer, sardonic observer, loyal daughter, emerging writer – none of which remain unchanged for long. The diary thus functions as a rehearsal space where conflicting aspects of her identity coexist and evolve without final resolution.

Furthermore, the diary mediates Cassandra's internal and external worlds. Feelings that are initially obscure or contradictory become clearer only through the process of writing. It is within these pages that she unravels her jealousy of Rose, her conflicted desire for Simon, and her unease with her family's precarious class status. Writing becomes diagnostic: a means to retroactively organise scattered impressions and turn them into a coherent narrative thread. For example, early in the novel, she attempts to frame her family's unusual living situation in a romantic light, stating: *"I have just remarked to Rose that our situation is really rather romantic – two girls in this strange and lonely house"* [Smith, 1948, p. 4]. This shows her actively trying to construct a narrative around her circumstances, transforming challenging realities into a more palatable, even romantic, story through the act of writing.

Her awareness of the diary as a distinct mode of writing is explicit when she remarks: *"I have just read the journal from the beginning. I find I can read the speed-writing quite easily, even the bit I did by moonlight last night. I am surprised to see how much I have written; with stories even a page can take me hours, but the truth seems to flow out as fast as I can get it down"* [Smith, 1948, p. 26]. Here, the *"truth"* flows with apparent ease, yet it is still a written production – reminder that even her most candid-seeming entries are shaped acts of self-representation.

The diary also legitimises contradiction rather than eliminating it. Cassandra can adore and criticise her father, love and ridicule Rose, desire Simon yet question that desire. These incon-

sistencies do not demand resolution but are absorbed into the diary's layered form. Its temporal unfolding – with each entry reflecting back on earlier ones – makes contradiction a structural feature of her self-narration rather than a flaw in character. This interpretive process is especially visible when she reflects: *"The image that came into my mind then have been linked with that day and with Simon ever since. Yet I could never explain how the image and the reality merge, and how they somehow extend and beatify each other"* [Smith, 1948, p. 338]. Here, Cassandra acknowledges that her perception of people and events is mediated through an internalised image, revealing that her "reality" is inseparable from the interpretive acts through which she constructs her identity.

Moreover, the everyday materiality of diary writing highlights its function as a site of agency. Writing requires time, space, and privacy – scarce resources in Cassandra's cramped and chaotic domestic sphere. Her determination to claim them signifies an assertion of intellectual and creative autonomy in a context that otherwise restricts her voice. Through the diary, she not only narrates her experiences but actively resists the silences imposed by gender and class.

Thus, in *I Capture the Castle*, the diary is not a trivial or merely feminine indulgence. It is a sophisticated narrative apparatus that enables identity to be staged, tested, and reimagined. By composing herself on the page, Cassandra demonstrates how writing can serve as an act of survival and self-possession for those who lack other institutional means of expression. Through this self-reflexive form, Dodie Smith offers a nuanced commentary on the politics of voice, the instability of subjectivity, and the generative complexity of writing the self.

Cassandra Mortmain as a Proto-Autofictional Figure

Although *I Capture the Castle* predates the term "autofiction" by several decades, Cassandra Mortmain embodies many of the qualities that would later define this genre. As theorised by Serge Doubrovsky, Philippe Vilain, and Manuel Alberca, autofiction blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction, author and character, lived reality and narrative invention. While Cassandra remains a fictional creation, her diary reveals a narrator who is highly self-aware, reflexive, and engaged in shaping her identity through language. In this sense, she anticipates the autofictional figure: simultaneously witness to and architect of her own becoming. Cassandra frequently questions her own interpretations and perceptions, highlighting her active role in constructing meaning, as when she notes: *"Rose says I am always crediting people with emotions I should experience in their situation, but I am sure I had a real flash of intuition then"* [Smith, 1948, p. 21]. Here, she acknowledges her tendency to project, yet also asserts a genuine *"intuition,"* demonstrating a nuanced self-awareness of how her inner world shapes her narrative. This tension between reality and invention surfaces explicitly when she admits: *"But I couldn't make that up at all – I just couldn't imagine how it would feel. And I suddenly wished I hadn't imagined any of it…"* [Smith, 1948, p. 107]. Here, her inability to fabricate certain emotional states underscores her reliance on lived experience as the foundation for narrative, even as she engages in imaginative shaping – a dynamic that lies at the heart of autofictional practice.

Cassandra's diary is far from a straightforward chronological log of daily events. Instead, it serves as a recursive, self-reflective space where identity is not disclosed but continually produced. She pauses to critique her earlier entries, questions her phrasing, and revisits past feelings in light of new insights. This constant reworking indicates that the self-presented on the page is provisional, fluid, and constructed through narrative practice. The diary becomes both the subject and the instrument of Cassandra's self-exploration, embodying what theorists recognise as a central trait of autofiction: the narration of narration itself. Her self-reflexivity extends to the mechanics of composition itself. At one point she laments: "*Cassandra, you write yourself, so you'll understand that one's first draft can be – well, not always convincing. Damn it, I've only started since dinner"* [Smith, 1948, p. 316]. This remark foregrounds the diary's status as a crafted artefact, reminding the reader that even its most immediate-seeming entries are subject to the same processes of drafting, evaluation, and revision as other forms of writing.

Moreover, Cassandra's writing foregrounds its own literariness. She is acutely attentive to style, tone, and pacing, frequently reflecting on whether her diary achieves the effect she intends. She imagines an ideal reader and acknowledges her double role as both character and author. These metafictional gestures destabilise the diary's status as a private confessional and

reveal it instead as a consciously staged performance of selfhood. This deliberate theatricality aligns her with later autofictional narrators who navigate the tension between authenticity and artistic shaping. A striking example of this self-consciousness about her writing and its potential termination occurs when she debates her style: *"In future I will write it in stark prose. But I won't really write it at all any more, because I have come to the end of this exercise book"* [Smith, 1948, p. 67]. This passage reveals not only her awareness of stylistic choices *"stark prose"* but also a pragmatic, almost playful, acknowledgement of the physical limits of her writing, further highlighting the constructed nature of her narrative.

The emotional register of Cassandra's narration further supports this reading. Autofiction typically operates within an affective range that fuses sincerity with irony. Cassandra's tone shifts fluidly from earnest introspection to wry self-parody, revealing her unease with any stable or transparent notion of truth. Her narration holds desire and doubt, longing and scepticism, together in productive tension. This tonal multiplicity mirrors the autofictional impulse to offer partial truths and playful narrative misdirection rather than unmediated confession.

Equally significant is Cassandra's seamless movement between what she lives and what she imagines. She speculates freely about possible futures, reimagines scenes, and blurs the line between reality and daydream. These imaginative excursions are not framed as digressions but integrated into her account of daily life, highlighting the diary's refusal to distinguish rigidly between fact and invention. Such narrative fluidity is foundational to the logic of autofiction, where memory and fiction intertwine without clear demarcation. This awareness of her diary as a potential performance space is underscored when she recalls: *"They got me to read a piece aloud. I'm supposed to go and be tested – that's what they call it"* [Smith, 1948, p. 226]. Here, the act of reading her work aloud transforms the diary from a private exercise into a public artefact, reinforcing the tension between intimacy and display that runs throughout her self-narration.

Although Smith does not present *I Capture the Castle* as autobiography, and Cassandra is not a direct stand-in for her creator, the novel foregrounds how subjectivity emerges through the narrative manipulation of experience. Cassandra is not simply a diarist recording facts but a narrator consciously shaping a story that holds emotional and existential truths. This narrative self-fashioning positions her as a precursor to the narrators found in the work of contemporary autofiction writers such as Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Deborah Levy – authors who similarly use fiction as a tool to probe the unstable boundaries of self, story, and genre.

In this sense, Cassandra Mortmain can be read as a proto-autofictional figure. Her diary does not aim to capture a definitive self but to stage an ongoing process of becoming through an artfully constructed narrative. Her voice – intimate yet stylised, confessional yet consciously crafted – exemplifies a mode of self-representation that anticipates the questions and techniques of modern autofiction. Through Cassandra, Smith offers not merely a romantic coming-of-age story but an early, sophisticated exploration of how writing itself constitutes a way of living and continually remaking the self.

Writing as Existential Navigation

In *I Capture the Castle*, writing functions as more than a passive record of Cassandra Mortmain's experience; it is her principal means of navigating a world defined by uncertainty and constraint. The diary becomes a mechanism for orienting herself amid emotional and social upheaval – a tool for imposing narrative coherence on otherwise chaotic circumstances. Within a setting marked by decay, suspended ambitions, and social inertia, the very act of writing emerges as Cassandra's most reliable form of agency and self-preservation. Even in moments of intense emotion or frustration, her commitment to the act of writing provides a grounding force, as subtly revealed when she mentions controlling her behaviour to ensure her writing space isn't disturbed: *"Then out I went, controlling myself enough to shut the door quietly"* [Smith, 1948, p. 280]. This seemingly small detail underscores the discipline and quiet determination she brings to maintaining her private writing space, essential for her mental equilibrium.

From the outset, Cassandra's diary reveals an intuitive awareness of its stabilising function. She turns to it not simply to recount daily incidents but to work through ambivalence, express desires she cannot voice aloud, and imagine alternative outcomes. The diary provides a sense of temporal order and existential clarity that her daily life cannot guarantee. Faced with her fa-

ther's creative paralysis, Rose's precarious pursuit of a wealthy match, and the family's looming poverty, Cassandra crafts in writing a space where she can exert a degree of narrative control – a control unavailable to her as a young woman with few social or economic options.

Her diary entries, while often infused with domestic detail and gentle humour, frequently carry a philosophical undercurrent. She muses on time, mortality, memory, and the meaning of ordinary moments – conducting, often without formal awareness, an ongoing inquiry into her own existence. These reflections emerge organically from the immediacies of her environment: a quiet supper table, a locked tower room, the encroaching damp of the castle walls. In this sense, the diary operates as both a reflective workspace and an emotional refuge: a private sphere in which Cassandra tests thoughts, feelings, and possible selves. She articulates this reflective, cost-free luxury of inner thought and contemplation through her writing, observing: *"I don't think I should ever be a daisy…I could easily go on writing all night but I can't really see and it's extravagant on paper, so I shall merely think. Contemplation seems to be about the only luxury that costs nothing"* [Smith, 1948, p. 25]. This passage beautifully illustrates how her diary enables her to explore profound philosophical ideas about her own nature and the world, even when she's physically constrained, demonstrating writing as a crucial outlet for existential inquiry.

The castle itself, in its state of decline, intensifies this existential tension. As an anachronistic structure, it binds the Mortmains to a fading social status yet offers no realistic future. Cassandra's daily movements through its worn corridors and draughty towers mirror her psychological navigation of a world caught between past illusions and an indeterminate future. In this collapsing setting – both material and symbolic – the diary becomes indispensable: it provides narrative shape where reality offers only disarray and provisional meaning where her society supplies only silence.

Equally important is the way Cassandra transforms confusion and ambiguity into a crafted narrative experience. She does not merely note down disorder; she renders it with style, irony, and structural awareness. Her writing is vivid and often self-referential: she comments on her technique, revisits past entries to clarify or amend, and plays with her reader's assumptions. This narrative self-consciousness elevates the diary from a private record to a creative act of resistance and resilience. In doing so, Cassandra embodies what existential thinkers like Sartre and Beauvoir describe as the freedom to create meaning in the face of absurdity – not through grand philosophical declarations, but through the labour of personal narration.

Ultimately, the novel positions writing as both an epistemological and ontological practice. Through her diary, Cassandra not only makes sense of her circumstances but actively shapes who she is. The narrated self and the narrating subject are inseparable: each page reveals her becoming in language. In this way, *I Capture the Castle* offers a deeply philosophical vision of how narrative can serve as a vital strategy for living, sustaining, and continually remaking the self amid cultural and personal instability.

Narrative Ethics and the Question of Truth in Autofiction

Truth, Memory, and Fictionalisation

In the context of autofiction, truth is not measured by factual exactness but by a representational ethics that navigates the interplay of memory, narrative, and self-construction. *I Capture the Castle*, read as a proto-autofictional text, enacts this ethical tension with striking subtlety. Cassandra Mortmain does not write her diary to document an objective sequence of events; rather, she writes to interpret her world, to find coherence within uncertainty, and to inhabit her intellectual and emotional life through language. Her "truth" resides less in literal accuracy and more in the affective and philosophical integrity of how she narrates herself. This is poignantly illustrated when she grapples with a painful memory, admitting her reluctance to fully recount it: *"Why? When my whole heart was longing for Simon! Perhaps I could understand myself better if I didn't so loathe remembering it – even now I haven't quite put down everything that happened"* [Smith, 1948, pp. 254]. Here, Cassandra's conscious omission and her struggle to face the full *"truth"* of her feelings reveal that emotional integrity, rather than complete factual recall, guides her narrative process, aligning with autofiction's nuanced approach to truth.

Cassandra's diary foregrounds the constructed and unstable nature of memory. She frequently revisits earlier entries, amending her initial impressions or questioning her former certainty. These moments highlight that memory within the diary is not static but is continually refigured through reflection and narrative reshaping. In this recursive process, Cassandra embodies what Paul Ricoeur terms refiguration: the dynamic revision of the self through the interplay of narrative recollection and the unfolding present. Like contemporary autofictional narrators such as Cusk or Levy, Cassandra demonstrates that to remember is always, to some degree, to reinterpret.

She frequently reflects on her own honesty, doubts her memories, and speculates about how her words will be read in the future. She frequently reflects on her own honesty, doubts her memories, and speculates about how her words will be read in the future, confessing, for example: *"I can't remember her ever telling a lie. Truthfulness so often goes with ruthlessness"* [Smith, 1948, p. 165]. This self-awareness regarding truth and its construction within her narrative further solidifies the connection to Alberca's concept, as Cassandra herself acknowledges the subjective nature of her *"truth."*

The diary form itself enables and legitimises fictionalisation. As Philippe Lejeune observes, a diary lacks the retrospective closure of autobiography; it evolves incrementally, embracing incompleteness and narrative drift. Cassandra's entries exemplify this open-endedness. They often begin without a fixed plan, wander into speculation, and contain playful narrative departures from verifiable fact. She imagines how scenes might have unfolded, dramatises ordinary occurrences, and layers mundane events with metaphor and literary flair. In doing so, she privileges narrative as an aesthetic practice rather than a factual transcript. A clear instance of her blending memory, interpretation, and even a touch of fictionalisation occurs as she reflects on a past kiss, admitting that her re-evaluation has altered the memory itself: *"…Oh dear, that was a great mistake! My mind wandered from repeating to thinking it wouldn't have been sin if Stephen had been Simon. And changing them over has made me realize more and more how I have spoilt the memory of Simon's kiss"* [Smith, 1948, p. 254]. This reveals her active role in shaping and even "spoiling" a memory through her ongoing narrative and imaginative processes, underscoring the diary's function as a site of fictionalisation.

Crucially, Cassandra is far from naïve about this narrative shaping. She repeatedly acknowledges when she embellishes, expresses regret over what she did or did not write, and exposes her own doubts about the accuracy of her recollections. This meta-narrative awareness makes clear that the diary is not an unmediated outpouring but a consciously crafted text. Cassandra acts not only as a diarist but as an emergent author: she stylises her emotions, selects her details, and rehearses her selfhood in prose, shaped by both literary models and her need for narrative control.

The ethical dimension of this fictionalisation is nuanced. Cassandra does not aim to deceive; rather, she discloses the impossibility of producing a definitive account of one's own life. Her diary does not promise final understanding or absolute clarity. Instead, it accepts the partiality of self-representation and the contradictions inherent in memory and desire. This openness becomes an ethical stance: it allows for ambiguity and preserves the emotional depth that more rigidly factual narration might suppress.

In this respect, Cassandra's diary exemplifies what autofictional theorists describe as an ethics of incompletion – a commitment to provisional truth and epistemological modesty. She does not claim mastery over her narrative nor demand the reader's unqualified belief. What she offers is an ongoing interpretive endeavour: an attempt to narrate a self that remains fluid, mediated by memory, and articulated through the lens of literary and personal invention.

By operating in this mode, *I Capture the Castle* foreshadows the ethical concerns that animate modern autofiction. It invites the reader to accept fiction not as the opposite of truth but as an alternative way of accessing the layered reality of emotional and remembered life. For Cassandra, fiction is not a betrayal of the real but a means of remaining honest to its complexity – an honesty rooted not in factual reproduction but in the faithful rendering of human ambiguity.

Cassandra's Reliability and Narrative Gaps

The question of narrator reliability in *I Capture the Castle* is vital not only for interpreting Cassandra Mortmain's character but also for understanding the ethical stakes of her narrative

voice. Cassandra presents herself as an acute observer and emotionally reflective writer, yet her diary is punctuated by omissions, contradictions, and narrative hesitations. Far from diminishing the novel's credibility, these inconsistencies contribute to a more sophisticated narrative ethics – one that favours ambiguity and interpretive openness over didactic certainty. In this sense, Cassandra anticipates the autofictional narrator whose reliability is not an absolute measure but an evolving stance shaped by the inherent constraints of self-perception and language. Her musings about the privacy afforded by being alone in the castle underscore her diary's role as a space for unfiltered, subjective thought: *"It's odd how different a house feels when one is alone in it. It makes it easier to think rather private thoughts – I shall think some…"* [Smith, 1948, p. 106]. This quote immediately signals that the reader is entering a realm of private, unfiltered reflection, where Cassandra is free to explore thoughts she might not voice aloud, thus setting a tone of subjective truth.

Cassandra's unreliability is not rooted in intentional deception but in the subjective nature of her perspective. Her narration is filtered through youth, limited social experience, fluctuating emotions, and partial knowledge of the motives of others. She sometimes misinterprets social signals, misjudges people's intentions, or projects her own anxieties onto events. Yet these limitations coexist with moments of sharp insight and profound self-awareness. This interplay between perceptive acuity and emotional distortion transforms her diary into a text where truth is not delivered but negotiated, shaped as much by uncertainty as by observation.

Throughout the novel, key developments are refracted through Cassandra's unstable feelings. Her attraction to Simon evolves erratically, and she often struggles to articulate its depth or inconsistency. Similarly, her portrayal of Rose swings between admiration and jealousy, tempered by protectiveness and rivalry. Such shifting emotions produce narrative gaps: Cassandra sometimes glosses over significant moments, delays describing pivotal encounters, or alludes to them only indirectly. These narrative silences are deliberate textual spaces where absence carries as much interpretive weight as explicit narration. For example, when reflecting on a significant moment with Simon, Cassandra consciously chooses to *not* fully write it down, acknowledging the emotional weight that remains unspoken: *"It was so nice that Simon was here for it – tell him I enjoyed every minute – "It was glorious writing that – almost like telling him I was glad he had kissed me"* [Smith, 1948, p. 230]. Here, the ellipses and her subsequent comment about the joy of *writing* something that *feels* like a confession, rather than directly stating the full event, perfectly illustrate how Cassandra strategically employs narrative gaps and emotional expression over direct factual reporting.

Importantly, these silences do not signify narrative failure but mark the diary as ethically complex. They reflect Cassandra's discomfort with raw truths, her hesitancy to expose her own vulnerabilities fully, and her instinct to protect the privacy of those she writes about. Such gaps make her diary more faithful to the intricacies of consciousness than a seamless, coherent account could be. This resonates with narrative ethics frameworks that prioritise emotional honesty over factual consistency, recognising that self-representation inevitably involves revision, hesitation, and selective disclosure.

Moreover, Cassandra's writing style embodies a generative tension between immediacy and reflective distance. Although the diary's temporal frame suggests spontaneous recording, it repeatedly circles back to earlier entries, correcting or re-evaluating her first impressions. This recursive pattern undermines any illusion of straightforward chronology and highlights the diary as an interpretive artefact rather than a transparent record. For the reader, this means that Cassandra's trustworthiness must be understood as contingent and relational: she is credible not because she offers unchanging truths, but because she allows us to witness her process of making sense of herself through narrative revision.

Ultimately, Cassandra's partial reliability does not fracture the novel's integrity but deepens it. She remains compelling not by virtue of perfect consistency but through her capacity for doubt, self-correction, and emotional contradiction. Her reliability is provisional and embedded within the constraints of subjective narration. In this way, Smith anticipates the narrative stance of modern autofictional voices, whose authority derives not from claiming an incontestable truth but from modelling truthfulness as an ongoing, imperfect practice of writing a self that is never wholly complete.

Ethics of Self-Narration

In autofiction and related forms of life writing, the act of narrating the self is never merely aesthetic; it is deeply ethical. Self-narration entails decisions about disclosure and omission, about how to depict others, and about how to shape the meaning of lived experience within the constraints of language and memory. These choices are inherently value-laden: they affect how the narrator's own identity and the lives of others are constructed and understood within the narrative. In *I Capture the Castle*, Cassandra Mortmain's diary stands as a sustained exercise in such ethical negotiation. Her writing does not only reveal her self-understanding; it shows how she continuously weighs the moral implications of representing those closest to her. This complex interplay of affection, guilt, and even animosity towards loved ones is evident when she candidly confesses her conflicted feelings: *"It is extraordinary how fond I can feel of her really, not to mention guilty towards her – and yet hate her like poison in my imaginings"* [Smith, 1948, p. 230]. This raw admission highlights Cassandra's ethical struggle to reconcile genuine affection with private, less charitable thoughts, demonstrating her nuanced approach to representing inner conflict.

Although framed as a private record, Cassandra's diary is shaped by an acute awareness of audience – whether an imagined confidant, a future self, or an anonymous reader. This imagined readership influences her narrative choices and ethical positioning. She describes Rose's ambitions, Simon's emotional reserve, and her father's artistic inertia with a balance of frankness and caution. Frequently, she interrupts herself to wonder if she has been fair or whether her words might misrepresent or wound. These moments of moral hesitation mark Cassandra not as a passive recorder but as an ethically reflective narrator who continually interrogates her role as both observer and participant in the lives she depicts.

Central to Cassandra's self-narration is a tension between truthfulness and care. She strives to be honest, but she is conscious that total transparency can expose emotional vulnerabilities – hers and others' – to undue scrutiny. This ethical complexity echoes the challenge identified by critics of women's life writing, who note that female narrators often negotiate a double imperative: to articulate personal truth and to protect relational bonds. Cassandra manages this delicate balance with notable subtlety. Her diary avoids overt confessional excess and refrains from using intimate revelations as mere narrative spectacle. Instead, her writing cultivates an ethical tone, one that seeks to honour the ambiguities of her relationships without instrumentalising them for narrative drama.

Equally important is how Cassandra chooses to portray herself. Her self-image is not static or idealised. She does not disguise her jealousy, resentment, or moments of pettiness. Nor does she cast herself as a victim or heroine. Rather, she embraces her inconsistencies and records her emotional discomfort without trying to resolve or excuse it. This self-exposure, free from self-glorification, gives her narrative an ethical integrity grounded in openness and vulnerability. By acknowledging her flaws and uncertainties, Cassandra resists the temptation to wield narrative power as self-justification; instead, she uses it as a space for honest, if imperfect, reckoning. This is vividly demonstrated when she expresses deep remorse and guilt after an imagined scenario involving a male character, leading her to self-correct her thoughts and future imaginings: *"I have just looked down on him from the window and I feel most guilty about taking him for that walk in my mind; guilty and ashamed, with a weak feeling round my ribs. I won't do that sort of imagining again. And I am now quite certain I don't want him to kiss me"* [Smith, 1948, p. 107]. This passage reveals her profound self-scrutiny and ethical accountability for her inner life, showing her commitment to honesty even when it's uncomfortable. Her diary also becomes a space for resisting prescriptive gender roles. Reflecting on her sister's marital prospects, she admits: *"And if any family ever had need of wondering, it is ours. But only as regards Rose. I have asked myself if I am doing any personal wondering and in my deepest heart I am not. I would rather die than marry either of those quite nice men"* [Smith, 1948, p. 55]. This refusal to frame her own future within the confines of conventional marriage underscores her capacity to use the diary as a site of both personal self-definition and social critique.

Within a setting defined by decay – the crumbling castle and the erosion of familiar social structures – Cassandra's diary becomes an ethical act of resistance. She does not write to claim mastery over her life's meaning but to coexist with its ambiguity, to name its contradictions,

and to insist that an inner life, however unresolved, has value. Her writing is political precisely because it affirms that selfhood, and the labour of narrating it, matters in a world that often disregards such inner truths.

In this way, *I Capture the Castle* models a narrative ethics rooted not in authoritative truth claims but in the humility of self-reflection. Cassandra does not pretend to offer final answers; she offers the reader her ongoing attempt to grapple honestly with the question of what it means to narrate one's own becoming. Her diary thus foreshadows the ethical dimensions central to contemporary autofiction: the recognition that writing the self always entails choices – choices about honesty, care, and narrative power – and that these choices carry significance both within and beyond the text.

Intermedial and Aesthetic Dimensions of the Text

The Visual and the Material in Cassandra's Diary

Cassandra Mortmain's diary is more than a private record; it is presented as a carefully crafted artefact with clear material and aesthetic significance. From the opening pages, the narrative foregrounds the physical conditions of its own production: Cassandra describes the type of notebook she uses, her ink, the candlelight by which she writes, and the damp, textured atmosphere of the castle that envelops her thoughts. Her dedication to the act of writing, despite the conditions, is evident when she notes her long hours spent journaling outside: *"Heavens, Godsend church clock has just struck four – I have been writing up here on the mound for six hours!"* [Smith, 1948, p. 94]. These sensory particulars embed the diary in the concrete materiality of the Mortmain household, lending Cassandra's narrative an embodied, tactile dimension that underpins her self-writing.

This careful rendering of the diary as both text and object situates the novel within a wider intermedial tradition, where literary works consciously evoke or imitate other artistic forms. Cassandra's narration is suffused with visual references: she does not merely recount events but composes scenes with the sensitivity of a painter or a stage designer. Her descriptions dwell on composition, lighting, shadow, and colour, revealing an instinct to frame her lived space as an aesthetic environment rather than a neutral backdrop. In doing so, she turns her diary into an imaginative canvas on which the self is staged within an atmospherically crafted setting.

Material objects consistently shape the way Cassandra perceives and narrates her world. She pays close attention to the smallest items – chipped teacups, threadbare curtains, stacks of neglected books – not merely as background detail but as expressive signs that register shifts in mood, class identity, and psychological state. The decaying castle itself functions as a vast, layered visual metaphor: each crumbling wall or draughty corridor becomes an external mirror for Cassandra's internal uncertainties and the Mortmain family's social decline. She often blends the mundane with moments of aesthetic or emotional comfort, as seen when she anticipates a simple pleasure amidst the castle's decay: *"There is a light down in the castle kitchen. Tonight I shall have my bath in front of the fire, with Simon's gramophone playing"* [Smith, 1948, p. 343]. In this sense, Cassandra transforms her surroundings into an emotionally resonant landscape that sustains the diary's narrative depth. This detail foregrounds how even the simplest material comforts, like a warm bath and music, are contextualised within the physical reality of the castle, suggesting her ability to find beauty and order within its aged structure.

This heightened attention to the material and the visual also signals Cassandra's awareness of the diary as a composed narrative rather than a raw transcript. She is self-consciously a stylist: her entries are marked by careful tonal shifts, metaphoric layering, and an evident delight in the look and sound of her own sentences. Frequently, she comments on how moments appear to her – not just in reality but as they might be rendered in fiction or remembered later. This reflexive habit aligns her with the autofictional subject who acts simultaneously as narrator, curator, and image-maker: she shapes her narrative not only to express but to aestheticise her experience.

Such visual and material sensitivity complicates the diary's confessional impulse. Cassandra's writing is never wholly inward-facing; it is continually oriented outward, attuned to how physical space, light, and everyday objects inflect her sense of self. Her aesthetic impulse becomes a

form of narrative control: by attending to the textures of her environment, she finds a way to negotiate emotional confusion and existential anxiety. She converts the decayed domestic world around her into a site of artistic play and symbolic depth, claiming an agency that counters her economic and social constraints.

In this way, *I Capture the Castle* demonstrates that Cassandra's diary is as much an aesthetic artefact as it is a psychological document. The interplay between the visual, the material, and the narrative acts as both a thematic motif and a structural principle. By transforming the mundane and the dilapidated into elements of artistic composition, Cassandra asserts a creative authority that renders her diary an enduring testament to the imaginative possibilities of self-writing in even the most constrained material conditions.

Literary Aesthetics and the Modernist Sensibility

While *I Capture the Castle* is often categorised as a postwar domestic or coming-of-age novel, its narrative voice and aesthetic method align it strikingly with the sensibility of modernist literature. Cassandra Mortmain's diary – with its fragmentary composition, introspective tone, and pronounced stylistic self-awareness – positions the text within the broader lineage of modernist experiments in voice, subjectivity, and narrative form. Although Smith's prose is more accessible and less formally disruptive than the works of high modernists like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, her novel contributes to the same aesthetic endeavour: the nuanced rendering of consciousness through innovative textual strategies and the rejection of tidy narrative resolution. This conscious artistic control, even at the very end of her current notebook, is evident when Cassandra notes the physical limits of her writing while simultaneously hinting at its enduring significance: *"That' isn't enough to give. Not for the giver. The daylight is going. I can hardly see what I am writing and my fingers are cold. There is only one more page left in my beautiful blue leather manuscript book; but that is as much as I shall need"* [Smith, 1948, p. 342]. This passage beautifully demonstrates her awareness of her diary as a finished, crafted object, connecting her work to a broader modernist concern with the text as an aesthetic artifact.

At the heart of the modernist impulse is a conviction that the complexities of subjective experience cannot be fully captured by linear or strictly realist storytelling. Cassandra's diary exemplifies this conviction in its loose, episodic structure and temporal elasticity. Her entries do not follow a straightforward chronology but circle back to earlier thoughts, revise prior impressions, and project forward into imagined futures. This focus on the fluidity of psychological time over external plot development mirrors the modernist commitment to exploring consciousness as process rather than as static fact.

Cassandra's language further reveals her alignment with modernist aesthetics. Her prose is densely metaphorical, rhythmically attentive, and openly self-reflexive. She frequently comments on her word choice, questions her narrative style, and crafts her entries with clear awareness of tone and structure. This reflexivity echoes the modernist fascination with the materiality and limitations of language itself. Moreover, Cassandra situates herself within a literary continuum – invoking Austen, the Brontës, and Shakespeare – yet her invocations are tinged with ironic distance. She both claims and interrogates her place within these traditions, revealing a self-aware literary persona who balances homage with subtle critique. This is particularly evident when she compares her own writing habits to those of Jane Austen, demonstrating a witty self-awareness and a negotiation with literary heritage: *"I don't intend to let myself become the kind of author who can only work in seclusion – after all, Jane Austen wrote in the sitting-room and merely covered up her work when a visitor called (though I bet she thought a thing or two) – but I am not quite Jane Austen yet and there are limits to what I can stand"* [Smith, 1948, p. 26]. This humorous yet insightful comparison showcases her conscious positioning of herself within a literary tradition, even as she asserts her own unique, less conventional, writing circumstances.

This modernist concern with blending art and daily life permeates Cassandra's narrative. Her diary does not merely record domestic routine; it transforms mundane details into sites of aesthetic and philosophical resonance. The castle's worn stones, the shifting English weather, meals shared under economic strain – all are rendered with an imagistic delicacy that elevates them beyond ordinary description. This poeticisation of everyday experience recalls Woolf's treatment of domestic interiority in *To the Lighthouse* or Mansfield's sharp vignettes of fleeting

perceptions. For Cassandra, the visual and material world becomes inseparable from her inner landscape: what she sees is always entwined with how she feels and how she frames her sense of self.

Yet, unlike the dense opacity often associated with high modernist texts, Smith's novel retains a clarity of voice and warmth of tone that invite the reader into Cassandra's consciousness rather than barricade it behind linguistic experimentation. This tonal openness allows *I Capture the Castle* to explore modernist themes of unstable identity, linguistic limitation, and subjective flux without losing narrative accessibility. In this balance of innovation and readability, Smith demonstrates that modernist aesthetics can be refracted through a youthful, ironic, and emotionally candid narrator.

In this light, the novel serves as a bridge between Victorian narrative confidence and postmodern narrative play. It inherits modernist interest in fragmented form and interiority yet roots that experiment in a marginalised female voice often absent from canonical modernism. Through Cassandra's diary, Smith sustains the ethos of modernist self-scrutiny – not through radical rupture, but through quiet, persistent attention to how language, perception, and emotional life coalesce on the page.

The Canvas of the Mind: Ekphrasis and Visualisation in the Novel

In Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle*, Cassandra Mortmain's unique visual imagination isn't merely a stylistic flourish; it's the fundamental lens through which she processes, interprets, and ultimately narrates her experiences. This deep engagement with the visual is most vividly expressed through the novel's pervasive use of ekphrasis – the detailed evocation of visual scenes, whether real or imagined – and its sustained reliance on artistic metaphors as a primary means of emotional and cognitive organisation. Cassandra's diary transcends a simple chronicle of events; it actively visualises them, transforming fleeting feelings and mundane moments into meticulously composed images, framed with a painterly lexicon of light, colour, and composition.

Cassandra frequently stages events as if they were scenes from paintings or dramatic tableaus, often pondering how a moment would appear "in a novel" or "on canvas." This framing device imbues her family's eccentric domestic life with an eye for visual arrangement and symbolic resonance. Consider, for instance, her detailed observation of Rose's dramatic entrance and the subsequent interaction with the Cotton brothers: *"It was a wonderful moment when Rose stood there at the top of the stairs. It made me think of Beatrix in Esmond – but Beatrix didn't trip over her dress three stairs from the bottom and have to clutch at the banisters with a green-dyed hand. But it all turned out for the best because Rose had gone self-conscious when she saw the Cottons – I could tell that by the way she was sailing down, graceful but affected. When she tripped, Neil Cotton dashed forward to help her and then everyone laughed and started talking at once, so she forgot her self-consciousness"* [Smith, 1948, p. 55]. In this passage, Cassandra's ekphrastic skill is evident in her detailed evocation of Rose's descent. She immediately frames the scene with a literary allusion, comparing Rose to *Beatrix in Esmond,* a character known for her striking beauty and dramatic presence. This isn't just a simple comparison; it sets a high aesthetic bar for the moment, highlighting Rose's perceived glamour. The subsequent, somewhat comic detail of Rose tripping and clutching the banister with a *"green-dyed hand"* immediately grounds this idealised image in the messy reality of the Mortmains' lives. Yet, Cassandra uses this very imperfection to advance her psychological understanding of Rose, noting how the mishap breaks Rose's "*self-consciousness."* The visual details – the pose, the fall, the green hand – are not merely reported; they are interpreted through Cassandra's discerning eye, revealing both the staged nature of the event and its unexpected, beneficial outcome for Rose's emotional state.

This visual mode firmly situates Cassandra's narrative within the modernist lineage, echoing writers such as Virginia Woolf who utilised heightened visual and metaphorical language to render states of "being" through image and atmosphere. Cassandra continually frames her family and surroundings with an artist's eye, transforming mundane settings into images charged with aesthetic tension. Rather than directly articulating complex emotions, Cassandra consistently channels them through vivid visual analogy, transforming mundane settings into images charged with aesthetic tension and subtle psychological insight. Consider her early description

of the castle kitchen at night: *"The kitchen looks very beautiful now. The firelight glows steadily through the bars and through the round hole in the top of the range where the lid has been left off. It turns the whitewashed walls rosy; even the dark beams in the roof are a dusky gold. The highest beam is over thirty feet from the ground. Rose and Topaz are two tiny figures in a great glowing cave"* [Smith, 1948, pp. 6-7]. Here, Cassandra does not just record a domestic scene; she composes it with a painterly lexicon of light and color, transforming the ordinary kitchen into a *"great glowing cave."* This striking visual metaphor encapsulates the unique, almost primal beauty of their home life within the decaying castle, conveying a sense of warmth, intimacy, and perhaps even the protective, isolated nature of their world. The light *"turns the whitewashed walls rosy,"* hinting at a sense of comfort and a subtle idealisation of their surroundings, while the image of *"tiny figures"* within the *"great glowing cave"* quietly suggests their unique existence, almost like characters in a tableau, reinforcing her eye for visual arrangement and symbolic resonance. In this sense, her visual idiom echoes the modernist belief that the truth of feeling is best conveyed obliquely, through symbolic and imagistic resonance rather than literal exposition: *"The images that came into my mind then have been linked with that day and with Simon ever since. Yet I could never explain how the image and the reality merge, and how they somehow extend and beautify each other"* [Smith, 1948, p. 248]. This meta-commentary highlights her awareness of the intertwined nature of her internal world and its visual representation.

Cassandra's visual sensibility isn't limited to her own observations. The passage also demonstrates her capacity for empathetic ekphrasis, where she projects herself into another character's visual experience: *"For a second, I seemed to see with his eyes and knew how strange our castle must have looked, suddenly rising from the water-logged English countryside. I imagined him peering in through the window over the sink – as I bet he did before he came back without his brother. I think 1 got this picture straight from his mind, because just as it came to me, he said: 'I couldn't believe this kitchen was real – it was like looking at a woodcut in some old book of fain-tales'"* [Smith, 1948, p. 55]. Here, Cassandra actively constructs a scene from Simon's perspective, imagining the visual impact of the castle on an outsider. She visualises the *"strange"* appearance of the castle *"suddenly rising from the water-logged English countryside"* through his imagined gaze. This imaginative act is so potent that it leads directly to Simon's own ekphrastic comment, where he describes the kitchen as *"like looking at a woodcut in some old book of fain-tales."* This shared artistic metaphor – the *"woodcut"* – not only validates Cassandra's empathetic visualisation but also establishes a connection between them through a mutual appreciation of the visually antique and picturesque. Simon's simile reinforces the idea that the castle, for outsiders, exists less as a functional home and more as a composed image, a piece of visual art drawn from a bygone era, further emphasising the novel's central theme of aesthetic perception.

Moreover, Cassandra's diary demonstrates her active development as an artist of perception. She doesn't merely adopt images from established visual art; rather, she actively composes her own, meticulously selecting details, revising tone, and adjusting perspective. Her diary, therefore, isn't just a space for recording events; it functions as a dynamic workshop for refining her representational skills. Each entry becomes an exercise in rendering the elusive aspects of her inner life visible and legible through carefully crafted aesthetic forms.

This aesthetic sensibility profoundly shapes the novel's deeper epistemology. Knowledge, for Cassandra, doesn't primarily arise from abstract reasoning or linear analysis but from attentive seeing and imaginative arrangement. She understands her world not by analysing it in conventional terms but by framing it as an intricate interplay of visual impressions, emotional shifts, and symbolic motifs. The diary itself charts this gradual apprenticeship: Cassandra matures not only as a narrator but as an astute observer capable of transforming raw perception into nuanced narrative.

Viewed in this light, the novel's ekphrastic strategies are far more than mere textual ornamentation; they constitute its ethical and narrative essence. Artistic metaphor allows Cassandra to hold contradictory feelings in symbolic form, to approach what cannot be directly spoken, and to create a vital sense of coherence in a world marked by decay and uncertainty. The diary itself becomes a kind of portable canvas – fragile yet illuminating – through which she captures not just the physical castle but her own shifting identity as it takes form within the intricate frames of imagination and language.

Language, Silence, and Gendered Expression

Writing as Gendered Act

Cassandra Mortmain's diary is not merely a space for private reflection; it constitutes a distinctly gendered act of self-legitimation. In a cultural context that has historically marginalised or trivialised women's narrative voices, Cassandra's sustained commitment to articulating her inner life through writing is quietly but unmistakably subversive. Although she does not position herself as overtly rebellious, her very insistence on narrating her experiences as a young, financially constrained woman challenges conventional limits placed on female authorship and narrative authority [Gilmore, 1994]. Traditionally, genres such as diaries, letters, and household journals were culturally coded as suitable for women precisely because they were personal and private – forms seen as domestic extensions rather than serious literary contributions [Smith & Watson, 2002]. However, as critics like Sidonie Smith and Leigh Gilmore have demonstrated, such forms simultaneously offer powerful tools for narrative self-invention and discursive agency. Cassandra's diary exemplifies this paradox: while remaining domestic and intimate, it is also stylistically ambitious, intertextual, and self-reflexive. Through her writing, the private realm becomes a site for intellectual exploration and aesthetic experimentation. Central to this is Cassandra's awareness of her own status as a writer. She frequently critiques her prose, references canonical literary figures, and speculates about how her diary might appear to an imagined reader: *"I was most sympathetic with her over Father, but rather quick about it, because I wanted to write my journal. I only managed an hour before lunch but was able to work all afternoon, up in the attic"* [Smith, 1948, p. 132]. This meta-narrative consciousness signals that she does not write solely for catharsis or record-keeping but engages in an apprenticeship in authorship – testing her voice within a literary tradition that historically excluded narrators like herself: an adolescent girl, economically marginalised yet linguistically sophisticated [Gilmore, 1994]. This tension between her precarious social position and her stylistic ambition transforms her diary into both a genuine act of self-authorship and an implicit critique of the cultural structures that deny her full authorial recognition. Cassandra's gender shapes not only her marginality as a writer but also the relational and affective qualities of her narrative. Her diary reveals a self-formed in response to others – Rose, Stephen, Simon, her father – rather than through solitary artistic pursuit. This relational mode contrasts with the more linear, self-sufficient trajectory typical of the male Künstlerroman, which often centres on an isolated male artist's rise to mastery. Cassandra's development, by contrast, is fluid, emotionally entangled, and rooted in care and ethical attentiveness. This does not weaken her authority; rather, it models an alternative narrative power grounded in responsiveness and relational complexity. By writing her life with such nuanced attention, Cassandra enacts a feminist claim to selfhood, even if she does not articulate it explicitly as political. She does not broadcast her interiority for public validation, but she insists on the significance and depth of her inner experience. This insistence amounts to a refusal to be trivialised, sentimentalised, or erased: *"All I really want to write about is what happened just before he left. But if I let myself start with that I might forget some of the things which came first. And every word he said is of deepest value to me"* [Smith, 1948, p. 335]. Through the diary's lyrical, ironic, and self-aware prose, Cassandra constructs a form of authorship that is at once aesthetically compelling and ethically deliberate – a subtle yet potent mode of gendered resistance embedded within every carefully composed line [Smith & Watson, 2002; Gilmore, 1994].

Cassandra's Language: Style and Resistance

Cassandra Mortmain's language in *I Capture the Castle* is not merely aesthetically elegant or psychologically deep; it is fundamentally defined by a sophisticated and pervasive irony. Her diary entries exhibit a voice that is intelligent, sharply attuned to the complexities of her social and emotional world, and critically detached. Through this stylistic nuance and rhetorical precision, Cassandra articulates a form of expression that resists both patriarchal containment and sentimental reduction. Her irony is neither ornamental nor simply a confessional aside; it is a strategic and dynamic tool for negotiating power, identity, and relational ethics, consistently serving to enhance the vividness of her self-portrait and the novel's thematic depth.

1. The Nature and Achievement of Cassandra's Irony

Cassandra's irony manifests as a deliberate interplay between sincerity and wry detachment, often expressed through subtle undercutting, unexpected juxtapositions, and a knowing self-awareness. She achieves this effect through several linguistic mechanisms.

Understated self-deprecation: Cassandra frequently critiques her own romantic impulses or lofty aspirations with a dose of realism, preventing her narrative from lapsing into conventional melodrama. This is evident when she reflects on her desire to write poetry: *"It is like a flowering in the heart, a stirring of wings or if only I could write poetry, as I did when I was a child! I have tried, but the works were as cheap as a sentimental song"* [Smith, 1948, p. 199]. Here, the initial lyrical description of inspiration is immediately deflated by the harsh, almost cynical, self-assessment. The irony lies in the gap between her inner poetic feeling and her critical judgment of her own artistic output, revealing a maturity that transcends childish idealism. She is both the hopeful romantic and the detached observer, simultaneously experiencing and critiquing her own emotions.

Awareness of performance and pretense: Cassandra's irony often stems from her acute observation of others' and her own attempts to perform certain roles or maintain illusions. She can see through affectation, even as she sometimes attempts it herself. This allows her to comment indirectly on social absurdities or personal vulnerabilities. A prime example is her clear-eyed assessment of her father's long-standing writer's block, a condition the family has romanticised into a mark of *"genius."* While acknowledging that *"Mother brought us up to believe that: he was a genius and that geniuses mustn't be hurried,"* Cassandra immediately undercuts this performance of artistic profundity with mundane, even comical, details of his actual activities: "*I wrote yesterday that he does nothing but read detective novels, but that was just a silly generalization, because Miss Marcy can seldom let him have more than two a week (although he will read the same ones again and again after a certain lapse of time, which seems to me amazing)"* [Smith, 1948, pp. 35-36]. The subtle irony here lies in Cassandra's precise correction of her earlier *"generalization,"* replacing one seemingly lazy habit with another that is even more indicative of an un-hurried, rather than genius-level, intellect. Her observation of his *"game following up cross-references"* in the Encyclopedia Britannica further deflates the pretense, revealing her father's *"work"* not as a profound creative struggle, but as a series of eccentric, largely unproductive pastimes. Through such understated but incisive descriptions, Cassandra masterfully reveals the gap between the family's cherished illusion of genius and the more prosaic reality of her father's performance.

Intertextual playfulness: While Cassandra engages in sophisticated intertextuality, referencing Shakespeare, the Brontës, and Austen, she does so not uncritically. Her ironic comparisons – like likening her situation to Jane Eyre's or her father to a tragic hero – deliberately destabilise the authority of those canonical texts. This is not simply reverence; it is a dialogue infused with subtle subversion. The irony emerges from her taking these grand narratives and applying them to her idiosyncratic, often comical, domestic sphere, thereby both acknowledging and gently mocking their universal claims. This is vividly demonstrated in her pseudo-historical account of castle architecture: *"The later Normans began building great square stone towers (called keeps), but it was found possible to mine the corners of these – mining was just digging then, of course, not the use of explosives – so they took to building round towers... a trebuchet which could sling great rocks – or a dead horse – over your curtain walls, causing much embarrassment. Eventually, someone thought of putting moats round curtain walls... And then all castles gradually became back numbers and Cromwell's Roundheads battered two-and-half sides of our curtain walls down"* [Smith, 1948, p. 37]. Here, Cassandra adopts the didactic tone of a historical text, only to consistently undercut its gravitas with her own playful, anachronistic, and often comically mundane interjections. The jarring inclusion of *"a dead horse"* as a projectile, designed to cause *"much embarrassment,"* transforms a serious act of medieval warfare into a domestic inconvenience, revealing her ironic impulse to deflate grand historical narratives with the absurdities of human experience. Furthermore, her final, precise accounting of Cromwell's damage to her own castle *"two-and-a-half sides"* grounds sweeping history in her immediate, somewhat pathetic, reality, solidifying her ironic stance towards the romanticised past.

2. The Function of Irony in Character and Theme

Cassandra's pervasive irony serves several crucial functions in illuminating her character and enriching the novel's thematic landscape.

Asserting Intellectual Autonomy and Resistance: In a world where her social position as a young woman affords her little overt authority, Cassandra's ironic tone becomes a powerful mechanism for asserting control. She conveys affect without succumbing to raw vulnerability and expresses critique without overt confrontation. This allows her to maintain a measure of psychological distance and intellectual autonomy, resisting the sentimental reduction often imposed on female diarists. Her voice, through its irony, becomes a quiet rebellion against narrative and social expectations. This is acutely demonstrated when Cassandra grapples with Rose's despair after Simon's departure: *"My candle is burning out and the drawing-room is getting colder and colder – the fire has been out for hours; but I can't write this in the same room with Rose. When I look at her I feel I am watching a rat in a trap that hopes it will get out when I know it won't. Not that I ever watched a rat in a trap, nor does Rose think she is in one; but this is no moment to be finicky about metaphors"* [Smith, 1948, p. 66]. Here, Cassandra's physical removal from Rose *"I can't write this in the same room with Rose"* immediately establishes her need for intellectual and emotional space. She then employs a startlingly bleak and unsentimental metaphor – *"watching a rat in a trap"* – to describe Rose's deluded hope, directly asserting her own clear-sighted, if painful, understanding of the situation. Her final, almost defiant, meta-commentary – *"this is no moment to be finicky about metaphors"* – is a powerful declaration of her intellectual autonomy. It reveals Cassandra's conscious decision to choose direct, unvarnished language, resisting any impulse towards euphemism or sentimental softening. This deliberate choice of a harsh, yet honest, metaphor allows her to articulate a profound, critical insight without succumbing to emotional overwhelm, thereby solidifying her narrative voice as a space of intellectual control and subtle rebellion.

Processing Contradiction and Instability: Rather than suppressing ambiguity, Cassandra's ironic prose accommodates it. She frequently writes herself into contradiction, exposing the instability of her feelings, desires, and perceptions. The irony allows her to hold these tensions in suspension, without needing to neatly resolve them. This refusal to collapse complexity into coherence marks a subtle defiance of the narrative clarity often demanded of women in both life and literature. Her irony creates a voice capacious enough to hold doubt and multiplicity. For example, she writes: *"There used to be two of us always on the lookout for life, talking to Miss Blossom at night, wondering, hoping; two Bronte Jane Austen girls, poor but spirited, two Girls of Godsend Castle. Now there is only one, and nothing will ever be quite such fun again"* [Smith, 1948, p. 143]. The ironic framing of herself and Rose as *"Bronte Jane Austen girls"* highlights their romantic aspirations, but the sudden, almost bleak shift to *"Now there is only one"* punctures that romanticism with a stark reality, demonstrating her ability to both embrace and detach from her own narrative.

Humanising and Complicating the Narrative: Cassandra's pervasive irony serves several crucial functions in illuminating her character and enriching the novel's thematic landscape. It humanises and complicates her voice with depth and relatability, allowing for humor amidst hardship and providing insight into her coping mechanisms. This sophistication prevents the diary from becoming a simple chronicle of events, transforming it into a nuanced exploration of selfhood and the process of coming-of-age. The irony makes her charmingly self-aware and her observations acutely perceptive. Cassandra intertwines mundane realities with wry observations and charming self-assessment: *"I try to see leaves on the trees and the courtyard filled with sunlight. Unfortunately, the more my mind's eye sees green and gold, the more drained of all colour does the twilight seem. It is comforting to look away from the windows and towards the kitchen fire, near which my sister Rose is ironing – though she obviously can't see properly, and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. (I have two, but one is minus its behind.) Rose looks particularly fetching by firelight... Although I am rather used to her I know she is a beauty. She is nearly twenty-one and very bitter with life. I am seventeen, look younger, feel older. I am no beauty but have a neatish face"* [Smith, 1948, pp. 3-4]. Here, Cassandra's irony infuses immediate relatability into the narrative. Her attempt to mentally conjure a vibrant scene only to note how *"drained of all colour"* the present twilight seems, reveals a sophisticated, nuanced internal

world that contrasts idealism with pragmatic reality. The moment she observes Rose's near-mishap with her "only nightgown" is swiftly followed by the wonderfully self-deprecating aside: *"I have two, but one is minus its behind."* This concise, witty detail not only highlights their shared poverty with humor but also showcases Cassandra's pragmatic coping mechanism – finding the absurd in hardship. Furthermore, her clear-eyed self-assessment *"I am no beauty but have a neatish face"* combined with her perceptive understanding of Rose's inner bitterness, imbues her voice with charming self-awareness and an acute ability to discern character, thereby complicating her portrait far beyond that of a simple diarist.

In sum, Cassandra's irony is not merely a stylistic flourish; it is a foundational element of her narrative strategy. Her linguistic choices, steeped in irony, allow her to exert narrative control within a context of material and symbolic constraint. By deploying this nuanced form of expression, she constructs a subjectivity that resists appropriation and simplification. Her voice is one of quiet rebellion – not strident, but unyielding in its refusal to be neatly categorised, transforming constraint into aesthetic and intellectual power.

The Power of Silence and Inarticulacy

While *I Capture the Castle* is fundamentally a novel about the act of writing and the power of expression, it also pays close attention to what resists narration – what remains unsaid, intentionally silenced, or inherently inarticulate. Cassandra Mortmain's diary is as much shaped by her hesitations and omissions as by her eloquent prose. Silence in the novel isn't simply a lack of language; it's a powerful and meaningful presence that reveals the ethical, emotional, and social contours of Cassandra's experience. In this way, the novel participates in a broader discourse that reconsiders silence not as absence, but as a deliberate mode of meaning-making and subtle resistance.

1. The Nature and Manifestation of Cassandra's Silence

Cassandra's silence is a complex phenomenon, expressed through various forms of withholding and linguistic limitation.

Ethical Reticence and Deliberate Omission: Cassandra often chooses to withhold her thoughts at moments of emotional intensity or ethical uncertainty. This isn't a failure of her voice, but a conscious decision rooted in an awareness of the consequences of articulation. She doesn't narrate everything she knows or feels, especially concerning Rose's ambitions, Simon's affections, or her own burgeoning desires. These narrative gaps function as ethical pauses, signaling her recognition of emotional entanglement and the responsibilities that come with narration. Her reluctance to speak directly about certain truths reinforces the idea that language is never neutral, and that silence can signify care, consideration, and a deeper emotional truth.

For example, throughout the narrative, Cassandra often observes Rose's machinations regarding Simon and Neil without directly condemning them in her diary. She records Rose's actions, her own discomfort, and her interpretive insights, but she largely refrains from explicit judgment or revelation of her sister's full motives. This deliberate withholding protects her sister, maintains family harmony (as she perceives it), and allows Cassandra herself to process complex feelings like jealousy without committing them to definitive, potentially destructive, words. Her concluding thought, *"I don't intend to go on with this journal; I have grown out of wanting to write about myself"* [Smith, 1948, p. 342], while potentially signaling the journal's end, also carries the weight of a larger silence: the maturing understanding that some experiences are too personal or too complex to be fully captured, or perhaps should not be exposed, even in a private space.

Inarticulacy as a Register of Existential Experience: Beyond conscious omission, there are moments in the diary when language simply fails Cassandra. This isn't due to a lack of fluency, but because the sheer intensity or overwhelming nature of her internal experience exceeds the expressive limits of language itself. These instances of inarticulacy are often marked by ellipses, unfinished sentences, or delayed, circuitous narration. Cassandra's struggle to fully articulate powerful emotions – such as overwhelming longing, the pangs of jealousy, or inexplicable dread – reflects not just a personal difficulty, but also the inherent limitations of linguistic representation. For voices like hers, not yet institutionally authorised or conventionally structured, this inar-

ticulacy can be particularly pronounced. In this sense, her inarticulacy is subtly gendered, revealing both the personal challenge of expression and the broader cultural structures that historically restricted women's modes of articulation. The unspoken becomes a testament to feelings that are too profound or too nascent for words.

For example, when attempting to capture a particularly striking visual scene or profound feeling, Cassandra explicitly records her struggle to articulate the experience: *"Oh, I wish I could find words – serious, beautiful words – to describe it in the afternoon sunlight; the more I strive for them, the more they utterly elude me"* [Smith, 1948, p. 95]. It clearly illustrates her direct encounter with linguistic limitations. Her statement, *"the more I strive for them, the more they utterly elude me*," demonstrates that this isn't a choice to omit, but a genuine linguistic breakdown in the face of an experience that transcends conventional articulation. It underscores that her internal perception and the emotional impact of a moment can surpass her ability to capture them precisely in words, highlighting the ineffable nature of certain profound feelings.

2. The Perception and Function of Silence

Cassandra's awareness and portrayal of silence extends beyond her own narrative choices to the interpersonal dynamics within the novel.

Silence as a Form of Power and Resistance: The novel repeatedly stages silence within its characters' interactions. Mr. Mortmain's reclusive silence, Rose's calculated speechlessness when manipulating situations, and Stephen's quiet, devoted presence all contrast sharply with Cassandra's compulsive narration. Cassandra often reflects on these silences – noticing them, interpreting them, and sometimes even envying their ambiguity. She recognises that silence can be a potent form of power: it can withhold knowledge, control interpretation, and resist appropriation. Her diary becomes a site where these dynamics are explored and mediated. Writing, for Cassandra, isn't simply about expression; it's also about negotiating the tension between what *can* be said and what *must* remain unsaid.

A prime example of perceived silence as power comes towards the novel's end, particularly in her interactions with Simon. When Simon asks her directly about her feelings, her internal turmoil often prevents a clear answer. Simon asks *"I wish I could take you to America with me. Would you like to come?... Would you – Cassandra?"* [Smith, 1948, p. 341], is a moment charged with such unspoken potential. Cassandra's diary, at this crucial juncture, *records* the question, but the reader is left to infer her immediate, internal struggle and what, if anything, she articulates in response. Her diary often presents the direct question, and then either moves quickly on, or she describes her *internal* reaction rather than her spoken reply, leaving the silence of her actual verbal response as a powerful narrative space. This deliberate narrative choice highlights that her silence is not a void but a significant active space of emotional processing and strategic withholding. It shows her struggle to articulate complex feelings that are too overwhelming or too fraught with consequence.

Honouring the Partiality of Narration: Cassandra's acute awareness of silence is part of what gives her narrative its ethical and emotional complexity. She doesn't pretend that writing can fully capture the entirety of experience, nor does she reduce subjectivity solely to what can be put into language. Instead, she acknowledges the inherent partiality of narration and honors the vital role silence plays in shaping identity and relationships. Her diary thus becomes a space where voice and silence coexist – where speech is modulated by discretion, and where inarticulacy reveals not ignorance, but a profound depth of feeling and understanding. Her keen observation of silence as an active, sometimes disappointing, presence underscores this: *"After a minute or so, the enclosed silence began to press on my ears – I thought at first that this was a good sigh, but nothing interesting happened"* [Smith, 1948, p. 237]. This reflection reveals Cassandra's sophisticated engagement with the unsaid; she initially hopes for meaning or significance within the silence, but then registers its emptiness, demonstrating her nuanced understanding that silence can be both pregnant with possibility and ultimately barren.

Through this dual engagement with language and its limits, *I Capture the Castle* challenges dominant assumptions about expression, particularly in relation to gender. Cassandra's ability to write – and her choice, at times, not to – reflects a nuanced understanding of authorship

as a continuous negotiation between what can be narrated and what must be borne in silence. In this negotiation, silence emerges not as a void, but as a meaningful, structured presence that sustains the complexity of Cassandra's becoming.

Autofiction and Feminist Approaches to Narrative Selfhood

Integration of Autofictional and Feminist Frameworks

Cassandra Mortmain's diary operates at the intersection of autofiction and feminist life writing. While the term "autofiction" was not yet in use when Dodie Smith wrote *I Capture the Castle*, Cassandra's narrative enacts many of the genre's defining features: self-reflexivity, temporal instability, narrative fragmentation, and a deep interrogation of the self through the act of writing. What distinguishes Smith's novel, and what links it to feminist theory, is the way this self-narration is mediated by gender – by the constraints, expectations, and erasures that shape how women have historically been allowed to write themselves. For instance, Cassandra's self-deprecating commentary on her poetry reveals the internalisation of critical judgment, even as she actively seeks out unconventional spaces for creative expression: *"And I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring – I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house. Though even that isn't a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn't write any more of it"* [Smith, 1948, p. 3]. This early entry highlights her struggle for creative validation within a restrictive environment, a common theme in women's literary history where female artistic pursuits were often trivialised or self-censored.

Feminist scholars of life writing, such as Sidonie Smith, Leigh Gilmore, and Nancy K. Miller, have long argued that women's self-representation is structured by a paradox: the cultural imperative to speak as authentic subjects and the simultaneous suspicion cast upon female voice, authority, and agency. Cassandra's diary articulates this paradox with remarkable subtlety. She writes with clarity and humour, but also with hesitation and self-correction. Her language is both expressive and restrained. She is aware of being read – whether by an imagined audience, a future self, or the critical gaze of internalised norms – and this awareness conditions her narrative. These dynamics align her closely with the feminist-autofictional subject: one who writes not from a position of certainty but from within systems that complicate and politicise self-expression.

The autofictional elements of Cassandra's narrative – her recursive structure, her performative voice, her aestheticised subjectivity – do not stand in tension with feminist concerns. Rather, they reinforce them. Autofiction, in its contemporary forms, frequently stages the self as unstable, provisional, and constructed through narrative rather than pre-existing it. This insight mirrors feminist critiques of the "universal subject," which reveal how the ideal of stable, rational, autonomous selfhood has historically excluded or marginalised women's lived experiences. Cassandra's diary challenges that ideal not through polemic but through form: by presenting a self that is relational, emotional, and unresolved, yet also literate, reflective, and narratively powerful.

In Cassandra, Smith constructs a narrator who is both subject and stylist, both emotional and analytical, both embedded in her world and critically observant of it. This dual position – inhabiting the world and narrating it with aesthetic and ethical care – is what enables her voice to resonate across both autofictional and feminist paradigms. Her diary is not merely a record of female adolescence; it is an intervention in literary and philosophical conversations about what it means to become a self under conditions of constraint. Her sharp, often ironic, observations on gender dynamics underscore her critical perspective, as when she comments on the overwhelming nature of a man's love: *"But then no man ought to be as much in love as Simon is – it makes one resent the whole female sex"* [Smith, 1948, p. 254]. This wry remark reveals her nuanced engagement with gender roles and the societal expectations of romance, showcasing her intellectual independence even within emotional contexts.

Through this integration of autofictional and feminist frameworks, *I Capture the Castle* can be read not only as a historical novel of youth and longing but as a formally and politically sophisticated exploration of narrative identity. Cassandra Mortmain, writing from the ruins of a crumbling castle, gives voice to a model of authorship that is both radically interior and socially situated – at once private and profoundly engaged.

'I Capture the Castle' as Autofictional Prototype

One of the central findings of this study is that *I Capture the Castle* can be meaningfully read as an early example – or prototype – of autofictional literature. Although the novel does not formally present itself as autobiography, nor does it claim a direct identity between author and narrator, it embodies the key narrative, philosophical, and stylistic dynamics that underpin autofictional writing. Cassandra Mortmain, as a fictional diarist, occupies the autofictional space between invention and truth, narration and becoming. Her diary constitutes a space in which selfhood is performed, fragmented, revised, and continually reimagined. This constant re-evaluation of her desires and perceptions, even within the same emotional turmoil, is evident when she oscillates between longing for Simon and a more practical consideration of their compatibility: *"But why, oh why, must Simon still love Rose? When she has so little in common with him and I have so much? Part of me longs to run after him to Scoatney and cry "Yes, yes, yes!" "A few hours ago, when I wrote that I could never mean anything to him, such a chance would have seemed heaven on earth. And surely I could give him – a sort of contentment?"* [Smith, 1948, p. 342]. This internal monologue, complete with self-correction and a shift in perspective *"A few hours ago...",* perfectly illustrates the fluid and performative nature of her self-construction in real-time within the diary.

The diary's temporal structure plays a crucial role in its autofictional status. Rather than offering a retrospective, unified account of the self, Cassandra's narration unfolds in fragmented, recursive, and provisional entries. She writes herself in real time – interpreting events as they happen, revisiting prior judgments, and anticipating outcomes that remain unresolved. This temporal immediacy destabilises the authority of autobiographical hindsight and instead foregrounds the instability and contingency of selfhood as it is lived. In this way, the diary mirrors the structure of autofictional narration: a narrative voice caught between the impulse to testify and the desire to compose.

Furthermore, Cassandra's diary demonstrates a heightened literary self-consciousness that aligns with autofictional aesthetics. She is aware of her writing style, references literary models, experiments with tone, and evaluates her own narrative decisions. These metafictional gestures mark her as both subject and author – a narrator who knows that to write the self is also to construct it. The performative nature of her diary – at once intimate and aesthetic, sincere and ironic – reflects the dual imperative of autofiction: to tell the truth of experience while acknowledging the fictionality of its form. Her humorous, almost exasperated, commentary on her father's unconventional writing method reveals her own understanding of literary experimentation and her critical eye as a burgeoning writer: *"Apparently I was all wrong about Father. Apparently it is very clever to start a book by writing THE CAT SAT ON THE MAT nineteen times"* [Smith, 1948, p. 334]. This observation not only displays her awareness of narrative technique but also her playful engagement with what constitutes "clever" writing, directly connecting her to the self-conscious, experimental spirit of autofiction.

In sum, *I Capture the Castle* anticipates and exemplifies many of the defining features of autofiction: the fluid boundary between fact and invention, the recursive structure of temporal selfhood, the stylistic hybridity of the personal and the literary, and the ethical complexity of narrating the self. Cassandra Mortmain emerges as a prototype of the autofictional narrator not because she mirrors her author, but because she uses writing to think, to question, and to survive – to persist in the act of self-articulation amid the collapse of inherited forms and identities.

Feminist Implications of Narrative Control

Another major outcome of this study is the recognition that *I Capture the Castle* enacts a form of feminist resistance through its very structure: it grants narrative control to a young woman whose social position denies her overt power. While Cassandra Mortmain cannot alter the economic conditions of her life, reclaim familial authority, or freely choose her romantic future, she can – and does – control how her life is narrated. The diary becomes her principal site of agency, a medium through which she interrogates experience, critiques social norms, and crafts a voice that is both autonomous and affectively rich.

This control over narrative is particularly significant in a literary tradition where female characters are often spoken for rather than speaking themselves. Cassandra subverts this

tradition not through confrontation but through form: she is the only voice, the constant perspective, the frame through which all other characters are rendered. Even as she remains unsure of her feelings or deferential in her relationships, the act of writing confers on her a form of discursive power that she is denied in the social world. She may not shape the outcomes of events, but she shapes their meaning – through tone, sequence, emphasis, and omission. Her self-awareness about her portrayals of others, particularly her father, vividly illustrates this ethical narrative control: *"Oh, poor Father, he really pathetic. But he might at least do a little work in the garden. I am aware that this isn't a fair portrait of him. I must capture him later"* [Smith, 1948, p. 5]. This early and striking meta-commentary demonstrates her conscious effort to achieve a *"fair portrait"* and her awareness of her own power to shape perceptions through her writing, underscoring her active role as a narrator.

Moreover, the diary allows Cassandra to inhabit and interrogate the contradictions of gendered subjectivity. She reflects on her emotional dependencies, her desire for autonomy, her ambivalence toward romantic roles, and her suspicion of patriarchal authority – all within a form that offers her privacy, continuity, and aesthetic space. Rather than overcoming these contradictions, she stages them. Her diary is not a site of resolution, but of engagement – a place where she explores what it means to desire and resist, to care and critique, to feel and observe. This layered subjectivity challenges essentialist models of femininity and aligns Cassandra's voice with the feminist reimagining of narrative ethics and identity.

Finally, Cassandra's writing contests the traditional boundaries between public and private discourse. While the diary is technically private, its rhetorical sophistication and intertextual density suggest a latent public orientation – a desire to be read, understood, and perhaps published. In this way, the novel participates in the feminist tradition of reclaiming domestic and personal forms as serious sites of knowledge production. Cassandra's diary, while modest in setting, enacts a powerful literary intervention: it demonstrates that the interior life of a young woman – her thoughts, uncertainties, and stylistic innovations – can constitute a legitimate and lasting form of authorship. Her detailed descriptions of internal experience transforming her perception of the external world further illustrate the profound impact of her private mental life, mediated through writing: *"We shut our eyes and concentrated hard. I think the picture I saw were just my imaginings of what he had described, but I did get the strangest feeling of space and freedom – so that when I opened my eyes, the fields and hedges and even the sky seemed so close that they were almost pressing on me"* [Smith, 1948, p. 166]. This passage shows how her internal *"imaginings"* grant her a profound sense of "*space and freedom,"* which then re-colors her perception of the physical world, emphasizing the power of her inner narrative over external constraints.

Through her control of narrative, Cassandra creates meaning where social scripts have failed her. She does not gain power through rebellion or escape, but through language. Her diary becomes a space in which she not only survives but thinks, imagines, and authors herself into being. In doing so, *I Capture the Castle* offers a feminist model of literary selfhood – one grounded not in mastery, but in expressive persistence, narrative care, and the radical act of telling one's own story on one's own terms.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *I Capture the Castle* is far more than a sentimental coming-of-age novel. By analysing the diary of Cassandra Mortmain through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that Smith's work engages deeply with questions of narrative ethics, temporal subjectivity, gendered authorship, and literary self-reflexivity. The diary form serves not simply as a medium of personal expression but as a space of epistemological labour, where the self is constructed in language, time is configured narratively, and writing becomes an existential practice.

The key findings can be summarised as follows:

Autofictional Structure: The novel anticipates the defining features of autofiction through its recursive, self-conscious, and performative diary narration. Cassandra's voice emerges as a prototype of the autofictional subject – caught between self-exposure and literary stylisation, between lived experience and aesthetic construction.

Temporal Identity Formation: The diary's non-linear structure foregrounds temporality as an ontological condition of being. Cassandra's identity is shaped through recursive narration, affective perception, and existential projection, offering a model of subjectivity as temporally embedded and narratively composed.

Genre Hybridity: The novel disrupts genre expectations by blending romantic fiction, diary narrative, philosophical introspection, and coming-of-age motifs. This hybridity allows for a narrative that resists closure, authority, and normative gender roles.

Feminist Narrative Ethics: Cassandra's authorship within a patriarchal and decaying world constitutes a quiet but profound feminist intervention. She gains narrative control where she lacks social power, constructing a self through reflection, irony, and relational ethics.

Literary-Historical Reclassification: Smith's novel, often marginalised in canonical accounts, emerges here as a bridge text between modernist introspection and metamodern autofiction. Its formal and thematic complexity challenge dominant assumptions about literary value and periodisation.

Together, these findings support the central argument that *I Capture the Castle* deserves recognition not only as a beautifully written novel but as a structurally and philosophically innovative work – one that offers a compelling early model of self-writing in unstable times.

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AUTOFICTION IN A DECAYING WORLD: TEMPORALITY, UNCERTAINTY, AND NARRATIVE POWER IN DODIE SMITH'S *I CAPTURE THE CASTLE*

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Key words: *autofiction, temporality, narrative identity, written subjectivity, diary novel, feminist literary criticism, Dodie Smith, genre hybridity, narrative power, modernist sensibility.*

The aim of the article is to identify the narrative mechanisms of written self-creation in Dodie Smith's novel *I Capture the Castle*, with a focus on autofiction and temporality as key artistic devices in shaping identity amid cultural, historical, and existential decline. The study re-evaluates the novel through the lens of modern autofiction theory, integrating narratological and feminist approaches in order to explore how the chronotopic structure, diary form, and narrative indeterminacy function as tools for the transformation of the female subject.

The methodological foundation of this study is based on an interdisciplinary combination of hermeneutic analysis, poststructuralist theories of subjectivity (including the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler), classical narratology (Gérard Genette and Paul Ricoeur), and contemporary theories of autofiction (Serge Doubrovsky, Manuel Alberca, and Philippe Vilain). Special attention is paid to the diary genre as a medium for self-reflection and the literary practice of staging the writing self. The methodology also includes comparative analysis with contemporary female autofiction writers to situate Smith's novel within a broader genealogical and thematic framework.

The analytical focus lies on the interrelation between narrative time and identity construction, examining how the protagonist Cassandra Mortmain employs the diary form not merely to record experience but to perform and revise the self. Through close reading and theoretical contextualisation, the article investigates the novel's representation of gendered identity, class instability, and narrative authority.

Results of the research. The findings of this study reveal that *I Capture the Castle* exhibits a sophisticated temporal structure characterised by instability, fragmentation, and retrospection. These temporal qualities not only reflect the protagonist's psychological state but also establish a space for constructing identity in opposition to a deteriorating external reality. Cassandra's writing serves multiple functions: as catharsis, as reconstruction, and occasionally as simulation. This triadic function corresponds with the core gestures of autofiction, which blends real and imagined elements in order to preserve the narrator's sense of wholeness amidst disintegration.

The research demonstrates that the diary form facilitates a continuous reworking of selfhood. Cassandra's reflections and revisions of earlier entries highlight the performative nature of writing, whereby identity is not discovered but enacted. Her diary becomes a space where past, present, and anticipated futures intersect, allowing for a fluid and dynamic self to emerge. This aligns with Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and Bruner's theory of self as a storytelling construction.

Furthermore, the novel's treatment of gender and class reveals how narrative can serve as both a site of constraint and a mode of resistance. Cassandra's position as a young woman in a declining aristocratic family reflects broader societal tensions in interwar Britain. Her use of the diary to assert narrative control is interpreted as a feminist gesture of self-authorship, challenging patriarchal and class-based limitations.

Through comparative analysis with later autofictional works by Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Deborah Levy, the study underscores *I Capture the Castle*'s anticipatory role in the development of the genre. Cassandra Mortmain, though fictional, functions as a proto-autofictional narrator whose self-reflexivity, temporal manipulation, and narrative authority prefigure many of the formal and thematic concerns of contemporary literary autofiction.

This article positions *I Capture the Castle* not merely as a nostalgic coming-of-age novel but as a richly layered text that engages deeply with questions of identity, temporality, and authorship. By situating the novel within the frameworks of autofiction, feminist narratology, and narrative identity theory, the research highlights its contribution to literary traditions of self-writing and its relevance to ongoing scholarly debates on narrative form and subjectivity.

Moreover, the novel invites a rethinking of the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, demonstrating how imagined characters can inhabit the same ontological space as real authors through shared concerns of memory, selfhood, and authorship. This blending foregrounds the potential of autofiction not merely as a literary technique but as a mode of being that resonates with readers navigating their own fragmented and uncertain realities. The findings underscore the continued importance of studying under-recognised literary texts that innovate subtly, contributing to the evolution of genre and theory alike.

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