

The Magic of Handwritten Letters: Socialization in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*

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In this article, Ellen Sundermeier examines how socialization, one of the elements of cultural-historical activity theory, can be used as a tool to better understand the way shared stories are built through handwritten letters. Sundermeier primarily focuses on letters written by J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings* series) to his children, and also reflects on her own letter writing practices.

For me, almost nothing is more thrilling than the arrival of a handwritten letter: the familiar scrawl of your name and address, the slight wrinkles or tears indicative of the miles traveled, and the satisfying sound of tearing open an envelope to reveal the contents inside. I've been lucky to have a number of dedicated pen pals over the past several years, and I've found that the only thing better than receiving a handwritten letter in the mail is writing one yourself.

Writing letters has become a regular practice of mine, full of repeated patterns and many cups of tea. Earlier this morning (it must be in the morning), I replied to one of these lovely pen pals in order to best document my letter-writing rhythms. I always begin by rereading the most recent letter I received to refresh my memory on the questions asked and on my dear friend's latest news. When it comes to my friend Katie's letters, this normally involves reading several notecards full of her thoughtfulness and humor (Figure 1).

Reading completed, I put on the kettle to make a quick cup of tea as I think through the contents of the letter I'm about to write (life updates,



Figure 1: Katie is a great animal lover, so her notecards almost always include animals of some sort.



Figure 2: My usual letter-writing set-up!

stories about my nephews, what I'm currently reading, etc.) and choose a piece of stationery from my rather extensive collection. People know I love letters, so stationery has become a popular and much-appreciated gift. After adding a splash of milk and a spoonful of sugar to my tea, I sit down with a pen in my hand at the kitchen counter to write (Figure 2).

I have found this to be a soothing and familiar way to start my day for many years, but by far the element I love most about my routine is the lasting connection it has given me to my faraway friends. In the age of instant messages and social media, and despite the incredible convenience of these things, handwritten letters have given us a way to build our relationships much more deeply than status updates or quick texts allow. Over the past several years, I have acquired a documented collection of these friends' lives, full of joys, difficulties, and rituals which we have developed together. My friend Robin and I write the date with the day first, for example, since we met while studying abroad in England (Figure 3).

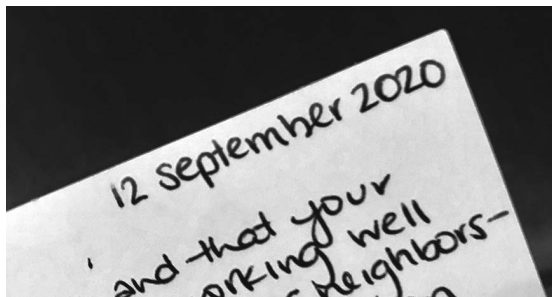


Figure 3: Robin's most recent letter using the British date format.

These letters have not only become a record of our individual histories but a shared history told in our own handwriting and sent to the many homes we've lived in over the years.

Dear Socialization

Literate activities, like letters, are important, because they give us insight into our own language practices and to the way words and stories connect us to the world. One tool which can be especially useful when exploring literate activity in this way is **cultural-historical activity theory**, or, CHAT. CHAT provides us with several overlapping and delightfully messy concepts that we can use to study writing in all its forms. According to Joyce Walker, CHAT can be useful for, “making a place for the individual writer within a particular framework at a particular time. *This* writer, at *this* particular time and place, trying to learn to write in *this* way, for *these* reasons and hoping for *these* effects” (6). Keeping this usefulness in mind, the ISU Writing Program has developed a version of CHAT that they call P-CHAT (pedagogical-CHAT) that includes a discussion of seven terms, designed to help writers think about the complexity of writing in all its forms. One of the seven terms, **activity**, for instance, refers to all the actions surrounding the creation of a text, much like what was described above in the little rituals and practices I incorporate into my letter writing. When thinking about P-CHAT, handwritten letters are quite special, because they have a specific audience and are influenced by both very small and very large groups of people throughout their creation. The “interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts,” can be described by another P-CHAT term: **socialization** (ISU Writing Program).

To break this down a little, the people on either end of a letter (the sender and the receiver) participate in socialization when they represent cultural and social practices in specific, personal ways through their letters. If I write to Katie about the experience of attending an outdoor concert, for example, I describe a cultural activity through my own lens, which she will then interpret and understand based on her own social and cultural experiences. In addition, both the sender and receiver are influenced, often unconsciously, by the larger communities surrounding them, and these affect the way a letter is both written and read. For instance, if Robin's university community begins to use the word “studenting” in its vernacular, Robin might use this word in her letter to me, even though I understand “studenting” differently based on my own communities. The influence of Robin's community on her vocabulary demonstrates socialization. While P-CHAT terms tend to overlap a good amount, I've found the concept of

socialization particularly interesting as it can be studied at multiple levels of individuals and communities within a single letter. Socialization, when studied deeply, can therefore provide a clearer window into the everyday world of the individuals who write and read handwritten letters.

Mysterious, Magical Letters

When I decided to focus on handwritten letters for this project, I began to research the letter collections of some of my all-time favorite authors. As you might imagine, these are much more difficult to find for contemporary authors since letter writing has been overtaken, in many ways, by the numerous, more immediate forms of communication which technology now allows. Jumping back just a century though, I discovered a collection of letters J. R. R. Tolkien (best known for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series) had written to his four children as Father Christmas. That's right—when the Tolkien children sent their Christmas letters to Santa Claus, they actually received letters in return. What a dad! The first letter was written in 1920, when the Tolkiens' eldest son John was just three years old, and they continued until 1943 when Father Christmas supposed that their youngest daughter, Priscilla, was old enough that she would be hanging up her stocking just once more (Tolkien 110). The letters are written in Father Christmas' tall and shaky handwriting and are often accompanied by beautiful illustrations of his home at the North Pole and his many quirky friends. Over the years, the children also receive some letters from Father Christmas' companions, most often the North Polar Bear who provides small, often snarky margin notes in the Father Christmas letters before he ventures into letter writing himself. The collection's introduction tells us that the letters' arrival at the Tolkien household were filled with magical intrigue: "Sometimes the envelopes, dusted with snow and bearing Polar postage stamps, were found in the house on the morning after his visit; sometimes the postman brought them; and the letters that the children wrote themselves vanished from the fireplace when no one was about" (5).

The mysterious activity surrounding the letters no doubt created numerous stories for the Tolkien children to treasure; stories only overshadowed by the contents of the letters themselves as Tolkien describes the many adventures had in the North Pole from 1920–1943. Tolkien's Father Christmas is very old and sometimes cranky. He is attentive to the Tolkien children's wishes, wears a red hat and coat trimmed in fur (still the most common attire for this figure in Britain and America today), and is also, as we learn, a strong military leader when it comes to attacks on the North

Pole (more on this to come). The Father Christmas in the letters is uniquely Tolkien's, while still containing many features traditional to the Father Christmas of the period. By taking a closer look at Tolkien's Father Christmas, we can see the effects of socialization both within the larger communities of twentieth century Britain and within the Tolkien family. Before moving on to the rest of this article, I want to take a moment to introduce one more key term, which we'll use to describe these communities: **activity systems**. Activity systems are “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal”; they are historically developed, inherently social, dialogic, collective, and are constantly changing (ISU Writing Program). So, in the Tolkien letters, we'll be discussing activity systems at multiple levels that operated around J. R. R. Tolkien at the time the letters were written.

So You Think You Know Father Christmas

In my mind, Father Christmas (or Santa Claus as he is more commonly called in the US) has a timeless quality to him, so I would not be at all surprised if essentially the same Santas we see in our malls today were seen shimmying down the chimneys of medieval children's homes. And, in fact, the origins of Father Christmas do date back hundreds of years. Many have argued for Pagan origins, most often because of the figure's resemblance to the Roman god Saturn and the Norse god Odin, and others make connections to the Christian Saint Nicholas who was born over seventeen hundred years ago in what is now Turkey (Crichton 16–26). To get some context for the Santa of Tolkien's society though, we must jump to about the seventeenth or eighteenth century when Father Christmas came into being in Britain with some connections to Saturnalia, the Roman festival of Saturn, celebrated each December. Because of this link, Father Christmas was, at this time, presented as a sort of Lord of Misrule as seen in Figure 4. He was often depicted with an impish grin and a drink in his hand or, on the flip side, as an ancient and gaunt Father Time-type figure (Golby and Purdue 71).



Figure 4: An 1847 depiction of a Saturnalian Father Christmas.

Around the 1870s, the British Father Christmas began to adapt toward an image much closer to the current depiction we see in contemporary society. This was due in part to Thomas Nast's cartoon depiction of Santa Claus in *Harper's Weekly*, beginning in 1863 during the American Civil War. Unlike the previous Father Christmas who wore green (who knew?), Nast's Santa wore red and sported a round belly and rosy cheeks. Around this time, Father Christmas also meshed with other traditional Christmas figures in Europe and America to begin sliding down chimneys and putting gifts in stockings (Simpson and Roud 120).

By the time Tolkien was writing his letters, Father Christmas had begun appearing within many of the activity systems in British society. He could often be seen as the mascot of charitable organizations for those wishing to fundraise during the holiday season with reminders like, "Ethiopian children will be without Santa this Christmas" (Golby and Purdue 88). Commercial industries also took full advantage of the Father Christmas figure during this time as he appeared in everything from greeting cards to alcohol advertisements. The 1920s also began Father Christmas's reign in department stores, giving children the chance to share their wish lists with the holiday figure within easy walking distance of all the toys and goodies they desired. During World War II, Harrod's Father Christmas also became an agent of war safety as he walked around sporting a tin hat in place of his red cap (Golby and Purdue 130). This brief history gives us some understanding of how the activity systems within British society embraced Father Christmas during the time of the Tolkien letters.

The many Santas I have mentioned are especially interesting in the way they illustrate a point about genres. Using the definition of the ISU Writing Program, Father Christmas himself serves as a genre because he is a production that we can easily identify based on certain conventions or features that allow us to recognize him. So, while Father Christmas has some characteristics that remain consistent in almost every depiction (a white beard, for example), each representation of Father Christmas is connected to its time in history, as well as to the particular ways people are using him. This is a great example of how all genres work, in that they are not stable—they change over time—and the changes are all bound up in the ways people use genres to do things in the world. Within different activity systems, people will use a genre differently, depending on what they want to do, the ideas they want to share, or the people they want to reach. Take a look back through the Santas I discussed above, and you'll notice that each activity system adapted the *genre* of Father Christmas to suit their own unique needs.

A Conversation with Father Christmas

So how did the Tolkien family create their own understanding of the Father Christmas figure that was original to them? I define the entire Tolkien family as an activity system here because, although J. R. R. Tolkien actually composed the letters, a reading of them will show that his children contributed to them in many ways through socialization!

One simple way to see evidence of socialization is that the Father Christmas letters often respond directly to letters written to Santa by the Tolkien children: John, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla. The way a text is “taken up and used by others” can be described by another P-CHAT term: **reception** (ISU Writing Program). Reception is not just who will read a text but also considers the ways people might use, respond to, or repurpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended). In this case, Tolkien’s reception of the letters his children wrote to Father Christmas can be seen in his references to their news and questions. In his 1928 letter, for instance, he begins, “I am another year older—and so are you. I feel quite well all the same—very nice of Michael to ask—and not quite so shaky” (24), and in 1930 he notes, “Father Christmas has got all your letters! What a lot, especially from Christopher and Michael! Thank you, and also Reddy and your bears, and other animals” (36), referring to their toys.

He also often references their Christmas lists and explains how he has tried to fulfill their wishes. “Well, my dears,” he says in 1928, “I hope you will like the things I am bringing: nearly all you asked for and lots of other little things you didn’t, and which I thought of at the last minute” (26). We learn that the Tolkien children often sent more than one Christmas list to the North Pole from this 1933 letter from the beginning of December: “I have had a good many letters from you. Thank you. I have made notes of what you want so far, but I expect I shall hear more from you yet . . .” (60).

The above examples illustrate how the interactions or socialization between Tolkien and his children have shaped the responses J. R. R. writes as Father Christmas. Together, they create a conversation between Father Christmas and the family with inside information (such as the references to the Tolkien’s toys) and replies that make it clear that Father Christmas has indeed read their letters: “If you think we have not read them” he says in 1931, “you are wrong” (42).

A Tolkien Father Christmas

Perhaps what makes the Father Christmas of the letters most unique is the stories which, if I can be so bold as to use this term, are quite distinctly “Tolkien-esque.” Those who have read *The Lord of the Rings* books will notice many similarities between the two including battles with goblins, helpful elves, lengthy poems, invented languages, and old men (Father Christmas and Gandalf) who are experts at fireworks. Though the Father Christmas in the letters is quite elderly and shaky and “gets worried when funny things happen” (16), he, like Gandalf, is also quite the military leader when it comes to defending the North Pole. The letters include mention of Father Christmas, “blow(ing) my golden trumpet (which I have not done for many years) to summon all my friends” (62) and a comment from the Polar Bear noting that, “you have no idea what the old man can do! Lightening and fireworks and thunder of guns!” (62).

But what does this feisty, Gandalf-y Father Christmas have to do with socialization within the Tolkien family, you ask? Well, quite a lot! As it turns out J. R. R. Tolkien wrote both the Father Christmas Letters and *The Lord of the Rings* with his children in mind. Referring to *The Lord of the Rings* in a 1968 interview, Tolkien says, “I read to the two elder ones who took a kindly, and on the whole, favorable interest in it” (“Interview with J. R. R. Tolkien in 1968”). Tolkien clearly had his children’s particular interests in mind when he crafted his Father Christmas character, as is evidenced by its similarities to *The Lord of the Rings*, so that his Santa became a figure that they as individuals would enjoy. This is a perfect demonstration of socialization as it illustrates the way people outside the creator of a text can influence the way it is constructed. If Tolkien had not been writing with his children in mind in each of these letters and in *The Lord of the Rings*, we may not have ended up with J. R. R. Tolkien’s unique storytelling style and the exciting and magical tales thus produced—socialization in action!

All Children Grow Up

When I described this collection of letters to a friend and explained that they were written over the course of twenty-three years, they responded, “So . . . didn’t the kids know their dad was the one writing the letters, not Father Christmas?” The short answer to this is yes, eventually. One by one, the children outgrow the Father Christmas traditions, which is another way socialization can be seen in the letters: when read chronologically, they provide a timeline of the children’s growth and some insight into other events happening in the Tolkien family. In 1931, for example, Father Christmas

(Tolkien) explains: “I am expecting that John, although he is now over 14, will hang up his stocking this last time; but I don’t forget people even when they are past stocking-age, not until they forget me. So I send LOVE to you ALL, and especially little PM, who is beginning her stocking-days and I hope they will be happy” (44).

Evidence of their growth is included in statements like: “Love to Chris: love to Michael: love to John who must be getting very big as he doesn’t write to me anymore . . .” (26), and “I’m especially pleased with Christopher’s card, and his letters, and with his learning to write so I am sending him a fountain pen . . .” (35). We also have allusions to family hardships such as on Christmas 1938 when the letter includes a note that “we have all been very sorry to hear about Christopher. I hope he is better and will have a jolly Christmas” (88).

Tolkien’s concluding letter in 1943 leaves us with a sweet farewell message for Priscilla, the last to outgrow the letters, as she hangs up her stocking for what Tolkien assumes will be the final time: “After this I shall have to say “goodbye,” more or less . . . we always keep the old numbers of our old friends, and their letters; and later on we hope to come back when they are grown up and have houses of their own and children” (110). I found it so endearing that Tolkien references keeping the children’s letters in his closing note. Socialization, I think, brings a deeper value to this collection of letters as they provide us with a unique lens through which to view the lives and stories of the Tolkien family.

Sincerely

As we have seen, approaching handwritten letters using a P-CHAT perspective allows for a clearer understanding of how letter writers and readers build shared stories through this literate activity. Because of socialization, we now have an inside glimpse into the joys, hardships, likes, and dislikes of the Tolkien children through the stories in the letters. J. R. R. Tolkien’s elderly yet surprisingly gritty depiction of Father Christmas has given us a mini history of the Tolkien family a full century after the letters were written.

As a fairly sentimental person, I have also kept all the letters I’ve been sent over the years by my dedicated pen pals. Over time, writing has allowed us to develop our relationships through scribbled words, stationery suited to our personalities or chosen with the recipient in mind, and updates somewhat slower than the pace of life. Socialization is evident in my own collection



Figure 5: A smattering of the lovely letters I have saved.

of letters, as inside jokes are developed and stories are shared in particular ways based on the contents of the previous letters—more deeply here, with reference to a shared hardship there. This project has made me feel lucky to have a record of the specific patterns and history I share with each of these friends, beautifully tangible thanks to the genre of handwritten letters.

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