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# The legacy of the 'woman on paper': why Georgia O'Keeffe should be remembered as a writer

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*The Legacy of the 'Woman on Paper': Why  
Georgia O'Keeffe Should Be Remembered  
as a Writer*

A Senior English Thesis

by

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**I realized that I had things in my head not like what I had been taught-not like what I had seen-shapes and ideas so familiar to me that it hadn't occurred to me to put them down. I decided to stop painting, to put away everything I had done, and to start to say the things that were my own.**

Georgia O'Keeffe, Introduction to *Some Memories of Drawing*, 1974

## Introduction

*When one begins to wander around in one's own thoughts and half-thoughts what one sees is often surprising.- Georgia O'Keeffe, Some Memories of Drawing*

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

looms large in the minds of art historians, modernists, and feminist scholars alike.

She remains the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most famous female painter. O'Keeffe's work became prominent in 1916 when her future husband and promoter Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) received her work in his gallery 291 and exhibited it soon after. We know the vaginal flower O'Keeffe, the tight-lipped, independent O'Keeffe who dressed in all black and lived to be 98 years old. People remember



**Figure 1-A** photo taken by Maria Chabot in 1944 of O'Keeffe composing her daily letter to Stieglitz.

O'Keeffe for her tremendous use of color and shape, her bright, visceral abstractions of nature. People remember her as an artist, as a painter, a woman, as Alfred Stieglitz's biggest accomplishment. And yet no one talks about her as a writer.

Many of O'Keeffe's critics and followers, particularly those that are still alive, have encountered the large body of letters O'Keeffe wrote and sent over the course of her life. In 2006, twenty years after O'Keeffe's death, the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University opened their immense collection of these

letters to the public. The largest recipient of these letters was Stieglitz. Most of the scholars that read O’Keeffe’s letters use them for historical analysis, particularly to understand their relationship. Prominent O’Keeffe scholar Barbara Buhler Lynes notes in her book *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* that O’Keeffe “was never a prolific writer” (Lynes 2). Despite having devoted her life to studying O’Keeffe, Lynes never took the time to analyze O’Keeffe’s use of language.

Some more recent O’Keeffe scholars have explored the tremendous influence Stieglitz had on her work, their research coming to fruition in the 20 years after her death in 1986. Analyses of Georgia O’Keeffe are not separate from his legacy. Some see her as manipulated and molded by his hand. What her writing shows is a hybrid of emotion; an O’Keeffe in love, simultaneously tied to her lover while grappling with her individuality.

The comment ‘woman on paper’ was Stieglitz’s first impression of O’Keeffe. He articulated this idea to O’Keeffe’s good friend artist and suffragette Anita Pollitzer (1894-1975) when she brought some of O’Keeffe’s drawings to Stieglitz’s gallery 291 on January 1, 1916. The phrase ‘woman on paper’ suggests the product is inherently female. In one sense, the phrase placed O’Keeffe in a box, confined by femininity and the sexual interpretations of her art. I use this phrase positively, for I feel in her writing O’Keeffe embodies a soulful and feminine nature.

In her writing, there is an O’Keeffe we have never seen before. My intention with this thesis is to prove her worth as a writer and to assess the effect her talent as a writer has on her legacy, both as a woman and person. I will focus on O’Keeffe’s

letters to Stieglitz from 1916 to 1922 and letters to Anita Pollitzer from 1915-1916.<sup>1</sup>

I want people to remember Georgia O'Keeffe for her language, for her playfulness with words, for her use of the dash. I want readers to consider Stieglitz's 'woman on paper' stereotype and think critically about what it means to be labeled as a female creator.

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<sup>1</sup> After O'Keeffe and Stieglitz moved in together in 1918, there was a gap in their letter writing. O'Keeffe and Stieglitz's correspondence picked up again in the later part of the 1920's when O'Keeffe started spending time out West, particularly in New Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> Greenough notes in the Acknowledgements section of *My Faraway One* that much of the preliminary

## Chapter 1: *My Faraway One*: The Stieglitz Factor

*They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered.*- F. Scott Fitzgerald from his book *This Side of Paradise*

I remember the first time I stumbled upon Georgia O’Keeffe’s letters. By chance, I read an NPR piece about Sarah Greenough’s 2011 *My Faraway One*, a compilation of letters between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz from 1916 to 1933. In 1981, O’Keeffe herself commissioned the piece, two volumes spanning their 31 years of correspondence, quite early in Greenough’s career.<sup>2</sup> Greenough’s selection, an edited masterpiece at over 800 pages, only scrapes the surface of the thousands of letters they wrote.<sup>3</sup> They wrote on all different sizes of papers, on backs of telegrams, postcards. As an art historian and lover of complicated, long distance relationships, my interest was piqued.

I checked out *My Faraway One* from the library and began to read. O’Keeffe and Stieglitz began to regularly correspond in January of 1916, having only met briefly several times before. O’Keeffe scholarship intertwines with that of Stieglitz. You cannot understand O’Keeffe as an artist, person, or writer without talking about her relationship to Stieglitz and his world. Stieglitz is considered the father of the American modernist movement, championing photography as art through his galleries 291 and later, An American Place, which opened in 1929. He was a

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<sup>2</sup> Greenough notes in the Acknowledgements section of *My Faraway One* that much of the preliminary organization of the correspondence between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz took place under O’Keeffe’s direction in the 1940s and 1950s. Her staff transcribed many of her letters. It’s fascinating to think O’Keeffe meant for these letters to be published years before her death.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Greenough is the current Head of Photography at the National Gallery in DC and a Stieglitz scholar. She is working on the second volume of O’Keeffe and Stieglitz correspondence, comprised of letters written between 1933 and 1946, when Stieglitz died. O’Keeffe spent much of this time out West in New Mexico.

famously cultured man, known in New York City and Paris for his elite intellectual circle and exquisite taste. Because of his reputation, O’Keeffe wanted Stieglitz to value her work and words. Their relationship was cemented in January of 1916 when Pollitzer brought her charcoal drawings to Stieglitz at 291. Pollitzer described Stieglitz’s reaction in a letter to O’Keeffe. He proclaimed O’Keeffe’s drawings “the purest, finest, sincerest things that have entered 291 in a long while,” (Pollitzer 116). After that, the letters flew.

The first three years of Stieglitz and O’Keeffe’s relationship was built on correspondence. They often sent each other two to three letters a day. At the time, Stieglitz was still married to Emmy Stieglitz.<sup>4</sup> O’Keeffe hated “to be completely outdone by a little thing like distance” (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 5). During this time O’Keeffe was an art teacher in Canyon Texas while Stieglitz split his time between Manhattan, writing letters late into the night at 291, and at his family’s home in Lake George. He sent her books and plays, writing to her about the operas at the Met and his engagements with his modernist circle, including Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, and Paul Strand. Even before O’Keeffe returned to New York City and moved in with Stieglitz in 1918, she had personal connections to a movement of artistic prowess that no other woman had.

O’Keeffe began to visit 291 in the early 1910’s during her visits to New York. In an early letter to Pollitzer in June of 1915, O’Keeffe commented that “the last time [she] went up to 291 there was nothing on the walls-chairs just knocked around-

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<sup>4</sup> Stieglitz’s marriage to Emmy Stieglitz was not a factor in his relationship with O’Keeffe. The couple had one child, Kitty Stieglitz, which some historians would argue kept him in the marriage much longer than he would have liked. That and Emmy’s immense wealth. A quote from a letter he sent to O’Keeffe on February 7, 1917 sums up his feelings. “I have always gone my own way-alone most of the time-I feel lost in days like these. If it wasn’t for the daughter I wouldn’t mind so much” (Stieglitz, “My Faraway One,” 107).



tracks on the floor and-talk behind the curtain-[she] even liked it when there was nothing” (O’Keeffe, “Loving Georgia,” 6). Evidently, O’Keeffe had a deep appreciation for Stieglitz’s work. She saw his creation at its barest bones, before she formerly knew its master. 291 was what first connected O’Keeffe and Stieglitz. This is crucial to understanding their relationship. She, with Pollitzer’s help, sought him out. She saw a man who could propel her career into something substantial.

O’Keeffe wanted Stieglitz’s approval of her art. After her first exposure to Stieglitz and his tiny gallery on Madison in fall of 1915, she wrote a letter to Anita Pollitzer where she articulated her desire.

Anita-do you know- I believe I would rather have Stieglitz like some thing-anything I had done-than anyone else I know of-I have always thought that-If I ever make any thing that satisfies me even ever so little-I am going to show it to him to find out if it’s any good-Don’t you often wish you could make something he might like? (O’Keeffe, “Lovingly, Georgia,” 40)

This letter came two months before Stieglitz saw O’Keeffe’s work. In a relationship, power dynamics are crucial. At the start of O’Keeffe’s relationship to Stieglitz, he held all the power, the power to champion or crush her work. In this passage, O’Keeffe feels a need to cultivate a voice, both on page and paper. She wants to prove her worth to Stieglitz and also get to know him better. The only way to achieve this was through letter writing.

O’Keeffe and Stieglitz had their own nomenclature. To him, she was his *Woman-Child*, his *Baby*, his *Little Girl*. To her, Stieglitz was *291*, her *Little Boy*, her *Dearest Duck*. He was 24 years O’Keeffe’s senior. They developed a written intimacy very quickly. O’Keeffe became simultaneously bold and encoded, hidden and exposed, exploring simile and metaphor in tandem to convey her thoughts. In a

letter written in December of 1916, O'Keeffe uses the metaphor of an earthworm to show Stieglitz how he makes her feel. She writes, "The nakedest thing I know of is an angleworm-and I feel that I've rather given myself that quality-to you-I hate

angleworms so

tonight I'm not going  
to talk about myself"

(O'Keeffe, "My

Faraway One," 92).

In this passage,

O'Keeffe's peculiar

nature peaks through.

She compares herself to something she hates, lays herself completely bare and then refuses to go any farther. The worm is a symbol of her vulnerability. Her language creates the space of the unspoken between her and Stieglitz. She feels the double bind of feeling simultaneous comfort and unease. There is something barren and shattering about the earthworm comparison. I imagine O'Keeffe lays nestled in the mud, waiting to be stepped on by Stieglitz, waiting for some critic to grind her up and spit her out. It is a strong and bizarre comparison. We feel uncomfortable reading something only meant for Stieglitz's eyes.

For every letter that O'Keeffe creates in a whirlpool of encoded syntax and hesitant intimacy, Stieglitz responds with direct language. He too is a beautiful writer but his thoughts read as more organized. He is more demonstrative with his feelings. A dichotomy developed between the two ways Stieglitz saw O'Keeffe. She

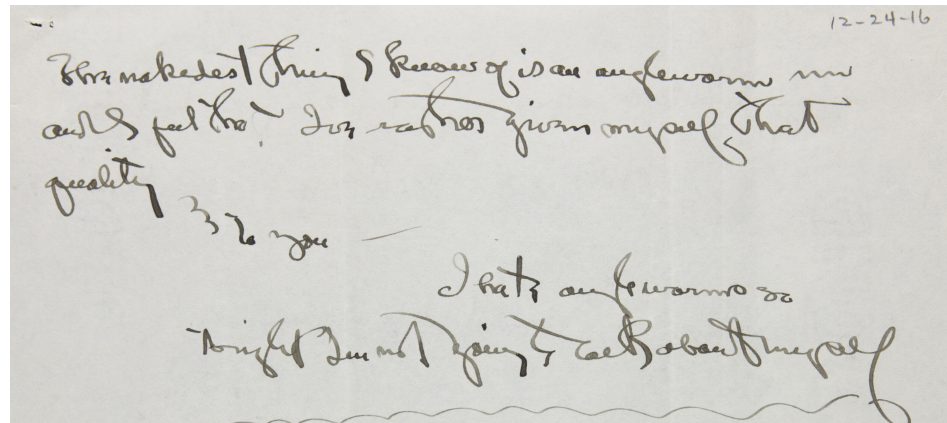


Figure 2-An excerpt from O'Keeffe's December 1916 "angleworm" letter

was both his enigma, a strong strapping Western woman who could walk 10 miles without stopping and paint long into the night, and his little girl, a hypersexualized love interest, untouched by another man. Stieglitz was fascinated with the notion of the Woman-Child, a woman with the curiosity of a girl but the sexuality and body of a grown adult.

In *Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the Women of Stieglitz's Circle*, author Kathleen Pyne explores Stieglitz's views on O'Keeffe as the Woman-Child. The Woman-Child conversation is significant to O'Keeffe's writing as it frames the way Stieglitz saw her. Pyne writes that Stieglitz saw "woman's sexuality as silenced by self-repression, inhibited by civilization, and powerful because she withholds it from man" (Pyne 215). O'Keeffe's control of her sexuality gave her power. With her nubile youth, she revived Stieglitz, both as her promoter and eventual lover. Stieglitz himself was struggling with a failing marriage, a daughter uninterested in seeing him, and a gallery closing. With her fresh take on the world, her need to "climb inside a balloon to feel the most primal, the most powerful human emotion," O'Keeffe helped Stieglitz (D'Erasmus). "She liberated his child self, showing him how to play, how to re-create himself" (Pyne 217).

Greenough describes Stieglitz's writing style as having a "bold, sometimes breathless, and often poetic tone as one idea tumbles over another in rapid succession" (Greenough xv). His writing is declarative, broad and occasionally callous, which in turn opened O'Keeffe up to a more confident writing style. Stieglitz made rash comments to O'Keeffe regularly. In the early letter to O'Keeffe he asked her if she would bear his children. He was still married. Perhaps Stieglitz' rashness

is his way of expressing intimacy. He was so enamored with O'Keeffe, so excited by her creations, that his bold behavior was the only way he could convey his innermost feelings.

His letters exist in a space between perversity and romanticism. Take this letter to O'Keeffe in October of 1917.

I wonder if you still [feel] like strangling me-I wouldn't mind-perhaps it would do quite as well as a kiss-My neck is 15 ½ -I think your hands would reach around-or would you use a rope-or like Othello a kerchief-or pillow-he smothered Desdemona-Smother with kisses and choke with hands-at the same time.- (Stieglitz, "My Faraway One," 202).

In this passage, Stieglitz responds to an earlier letter to O'Keeffe where she wrote "One thing saves me from wanting to shoot or strangle or drown [you]" (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 200). She is not responding to a particular action of Stieglitz. Being his painter and lover came with a number of frustrations. O'Keeffe regularly chastised Stieglitz in her letters, prompted by the limitations of distance as well the control he attempted to enforce over her. The passage below demonstrates such hybridity of feeling. Stieglitz's writing here is perverse. He is turned on by the thought of O'Keeffe choking him; he compares it to kissing. Surely, his reference to Desdemona's dramatic death in Othello suggests jealousy. Stieglitz tried to control O'Keeffe's various courtships from afar. While Stieglitz won in the end he couldn't stop O'Keeffe from having many potential loves during her time spent in Canyon Ranch as an art teacher.

Through his many pet names for O'Keeffe, Stieglitz shows his limited, biased understanding of the female mind and soul. In his 1919 essay "Woman on Paper," he writes to American artist S. Macdonald Wright "the Woman receives the World

through her womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second” (Norman 137). He can only understand O’Keeffe through her sexuality, through how she can fulfill his career and sexual needs. He cares for her deeply but feels a need to control her. As the first of O’Keeffe’s lovers, he was formative in cultivating her sexual identity, as an individual, on the page and in public. Take this example from a letter from November of 1916.

There never was a letter like the one right here before me-a Woman’s Soul laid bare in all its beauty-pulsating-crying out into the starlight night-Windstill-and no one hears but? (Stieglitz, “My Faraway One,” 61).

Stieglitz uses the dash in this letter to center his writing, separating his words to help them stand out. His words conjure up the sound of a woman crying out during orgasm. The passage is not fragile but rather tinged with longing. It even suggests a linguistic erection. She turns him on and he knows it.

O’Keeffe feels the bittersweet elements of their relationship even more than Stieglitz. She “staggers under pressure of eros,” of conveying her most vulnerable thoughts. “A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue” (Carson 106). O’Keeffe spends several of her letters questioning the dichotomy of woman versus child. She struggles with Stieglitz’s version of her identity. In June of 1917, she concludes her letter with thoughts on their relationship,

So again tonight-I don’t know if it’s woman or little girl-I am mostly both-I want to put my arms round you-kiss you-let you kiss me-It’s all very quiet-what I want is very quiet (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 167).

Here she succumbs to the duality of woman and girl. She is “mostly both,” leaving a blank space for the other elements of her identity. She wants Stieglitz in the “quiet,” as both his baby and lover. This is not the first example of her being his “little girl.”

In a letter just a month early after a quick visit to New York, O’Keeffe writes that she would “like to be a baby tonight-have wanted to be ever since [she] left Stieglitz” (O’Keeffe , “My Faraway One,” 153). She begins to know what she wants and asks for it.

Despite the conflict she felt over Stieglitz’s construction of her image, O’Keeffe greatly valued his opinion. She thanked him for his encouragement consistently in her letters. On a late night in 1917 in Canyon Ranch, Texas, she writes to him about her appreciation for his encouraging words,

I never got so much encouragement-any in fact-to work things out naturally-as they come to me-291-You-believing in me-that makes me believe in myself-has made it possible to be myself-And feeling that you believe-the other folks don’t matter-I don’t care the snap of my finger for any of them. (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 167).

In this letter, O’Keeffe is not writing about her sexual or romantic feelings towards Stieglitz, making this passage unique. She shares her feelings about his influence on her work. O’Keeffe parses out her

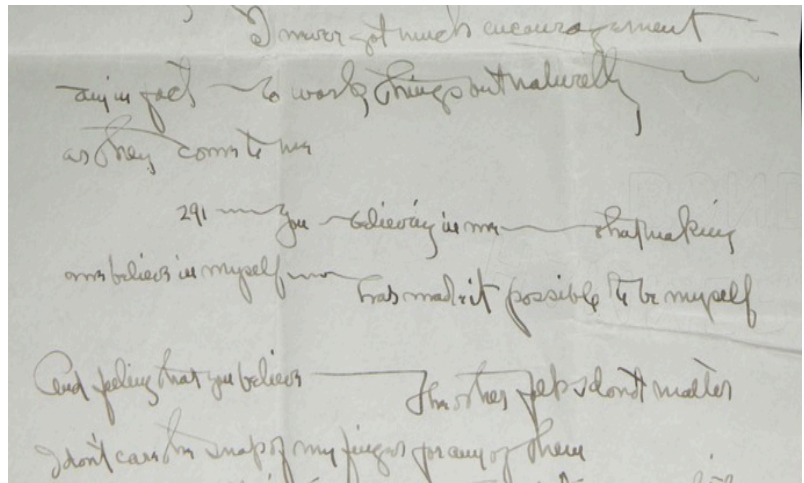


Figure 3-An excerpt from the June 29 letter in O’Keeffe’s hand

words in this passage deliberately. The repetition of word “believe” connects her to Stieglitz; his belief in her work allows her to believe in herself. Not only does his belief allow her to believe in herself but to *be* herself. She slowly builds a bridge between them. The letter B combined with the vowel E has a sweet tone. It allows the passage to swell. She contrasts such sweet alliterative sentences with the phrase

“I don’t care a snap of my finger.” The phrase snaps. We imagine O’Keeffe pressing her long, weathered middle finger to her palm; in one swift motion, her anxiety is gone.

Stieglitz saw O’Keeffe’s art as an extension of her soul, understanding her through his vision of sensual female, both publicly to the art community and internally, as he fantasized about their lives together. From their first smattering of letters in the winter of 1916, their relationship escalated very quickly. Their letters detailed their daily lives, pumped with the tension of romantic and sexual feelings for each other. O’Keeffe learned how Stieglitz saw her and worked within that sensual, female pulsing frame. She became the ‘woman on paper,’ shaped through his intense molding. The work she gave him was abstract, not obviously connected to female genitalia or what he saw as a female expression of the soul. Stieglitz made a concrete decision to market O’Keeffe as a woman artist, sensual and vibrant. O’Keeffe let this happen, both because she loved him, but also for the sake of her career and art. I have chosen to focus on their correspondence as opposed to other collections of O’Keeffe’s letters as I feel they are the best examples of her as a writer. In them she exists in a vacuum of multiplicities, both hesitant and energetic, artist and writer, bursting at the seams with anxiety and passion. We would not have these letters without Stieglitz; we would not have the Georgia O’Keeffe we know without him. For all of his shortcomings, Stieglitz championed O’Keeffe’s work. Because she wrote to him, we get to read her letters today.

## Chapter 2: O’Keeffe’s Value as a Writer

*Poems will be called letters and letters will be called poems.* -Susan Howe in her essay “These Flames and Generosities of Heart”

Greenough, the world’s expert on the letters between Stieglitz and O’Keeffe, only spends a paragraph in *My Faraway One* describing O’Keeffe’s writing style. Her book is a biography. While it is a resource for art historians and casual readers alike, it fails to place any hard analysis on the O’Keeffe or Stieglitz’s written words.

Greenough appreciates the “aesthetic qualities” of O’Keeffe’s letters, her curly, calligraphic black ink that sprawls pages after page. She describes O’Keeffe’s letters as “filled with long wavy dashes, vertical and diagonal lines, multiple dots, and even curlicues that fracture her ideas into short, often vivid phrases” (Greenough xv).

Skating over the syntactical elements of the letters, Greenough labels O’Keeffe’s writing as ‘impressionistic [and] less analytical’ than perhaps Stieglitz’ educated hand. To her, O’Keeffe’s process is an “almost elliptical method of thinking and a wish to literally sketch out her ideas rather than verbally articulate them”

(Greenough xv). Greenough’s analysis of O’Keeffe’s writing is superficial but correct.

There is a beautiful ellipticism to O’Keeffe’s process. She writes the same way she applies paint to a canvas. In her distinctive cursive, O’Keeffe *layers* her words rather than connecting them. Greenough’s collection reveals that O’Keeffe is a poet. Her words deserve attention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to her letters, O’Keeffe published two books, *Georgia O’Keeffe* and *Some Memories of Drawing*. Both appeared in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when O’Keeffe was in her late 80s. In both works, O’Keeffe pairs pieces of her art with several paragraphs on her memory of creation. While beautiful coffee table books, these works do not show O’Keeffe’s talent as a writer. These are heavily edited pieces of work. Also, O’Keeffe began to lose her eyesight in the early 1970s, making me question how much these books are actually O’Keeffe’s work.



O’Keeffe’s letters are teased out poetry. In them, she is hesitant, exposed, figuring herself out sentence by sentence and stroke by stroke. Of course, many of the letters simply describe her daily life in colloquial, list-like language. They act as historical documents rather than literature. The poetic qualities of her writing exist in small snippets, occasionally for entire paragraphs or in rare cases, full letters. The nature of the letter as a form bridges the colloquial with the poetic. It is a large reason her writing is rarely read for syntax and quality. The historical, quotidian elements are easier to follow. Even so, the most daily musings have a certain visceral essence to them. They are enjoyable to read. Take the beginning of a letter O’Keeffe wrote to Stieglitz on April 30, 1918 while in Waring, Texas.

Greetings-Your letters last evening were great.-There were three of them-two mailed 25<sup>th</sup>-one 26<sup>th</sup>-Did I tell you that the first couple of weeks we were up here Walsh-the postmaster-asked Leah one day who those big fat letters I get were from-She told him in a slow funny way she has of talking sometimes-that she didn’t know-that maybe they were bills and he didn’t say any more- (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 278).

There is a positive energy here, a kind of free flowing speech. She takes a full paragraph to convey the postmaster curiosity about Stieglitz’s letters. Even in these basic passages, O’Keeffe’s sentences are fragments. She never uses a period, always letting one thought blend into the next. Later in that letter, there is a beautiful passage about color.

The color was wonderful-Color doesn’t often thrill me-but I walked up the road-it’s up hill-then level-then up again to a wonderful view of valley and mountains as you look back-your letters in my hand-the first one open-I not reading because the color of the world just seemed to go through me and through me-I saw colors I had never seen before (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 279).

In this passage, O’Keeffe celebrates the colors of the valleys and the effect the large Stieglitz letters have on her. She connects to the more mundane passage in the beginning of the letter; those “big fat letters” are her treasures. The essence of the letters, sitting open in her pocket, words spilling out into her soul, meld with colors she “had never seen before,” creating a synesthetic effect.

The synesthetic qualities of O’Keeffe’s letters, their hybrid effect of conveying two different emotions and feeling of places, are remarkable. In a 2009 lecture at the American Academy, writer Susan Howe discusses this type of hybridity in relation to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Much of Howe’s analysis on Dickinson, both in her content and execution, applies to the language in O’Keeffe’s letters. A student who went to the lecture articulates Howe’s thoughts in a Wordpress post. The letters “become characterized by a hybridity of disparate elements, blurring for example the boundaries between visual and verbal art. They inhabit what Howe calls a space of inbetweenness” (Jeroenn). O’Keeffe writes as an artist. Her handwriting beautiful and almost illegible, O’Keeffe utilizes the aesthetic in her letters, both visibly and in her language. The dash is her main tool in her arsenal. She is able to exist in several places, becoming a master of double meaning. Stieglitz is her creative muse and commander, pulling at both ends of O’Keeffe’s unconscious. That kind of pulse creates insightful, ingenious correspondence. In this chapter, I explore the syntactical and punctuation choices that make her language soar. I also make the analogy that O’Keeffe writing is comparable different mediums of art: oil painting, watercolor, and charcoal. I conclude with a section on her erotic writing—a break from the heavily encoded, hesitant passages consistently in her letters.

All of O’Keeffe’s letters are mostly unedited which makes analyzing them all the more pleasurable and fresh. Take the time to look at the images in the text of the original letters and her free-flowing, seismic handwriting. The visceral effect of looking at the original letters is incomparable.

*I suppose I’m a blank-a blank wanting to say something and of course a blank has nothing to say.*- Georgia O’Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz written on November 27, 1916

Georgia

O’Keeffe had an ambivalent relationship with

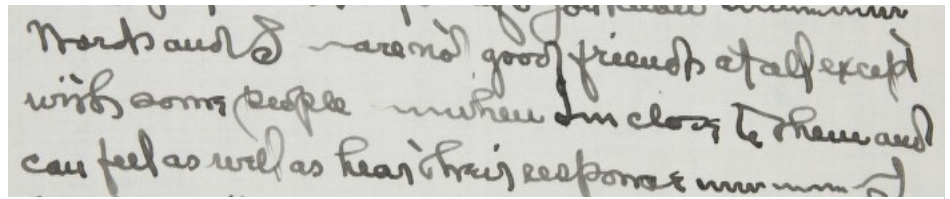


Figure 4- An excerpt from the February 1, 1916 letter in O’Keeffe’s hand

words. That relationship gradually turned bittersweet and eventually became comfortable. In one of her first letters to Stieglitz, she writes, “Words and I-are not good friends at all except with some people-when I’m close to them and can feel as well as hear their response” (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 4). Here she reveals a key element of her writing: her consciousness of audience. When her recipient is a close friend or someone she loves, she writes better. The phrase “can feel as well as hear their response,” conveys a sense of language only she and her recipient can speak. She is writing not literally, but rather figuratively. Her letters exist in an intimate continuum prompted by the shyness of their author. She is hesitant, showing her inhibition through specific word choice, punctuation, and circular language. In this example, her hesitance come through the awkwardness of the phrase “are not good friends at all except with some people,” (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 4). She personifies “words” with her claim that they are not friends and then switches the subject of the sentence to “people,” her recipients. Through such unwieldy phrasing,

O'Keeffe places little confidence in her reader. She makes the claim she should not be writing anything. And still there is a slight magic to her trepidation. These letters are intimate gestures of O'Keeffe, a woman constantly aware of her audience, maybe even more as a writer than a painter as her artwork was made for public display.

The 'Angel of the House' is the muse that controlled all of O'Keeffe's work, both as an artist and writer, especially when the recipient was Stieglitz. The motif comes from Virginia Woolf in her 1931 speech "Professions for Women." The angel is a symbol of women's hesitancy to create within the pressures of patriarchal, masculine culture. While the 'Angel of the House' symbol is not well known, the figurative construction of the female unconscious has a place in O'Keeffe's writing. I imagine a woman dressed in all black, sitting on her shoulder, conveying with the tiniest glance or pinch of the shoulder her disapproval. The angel resembles O'Keeffe, perhaps older, suntanned and free from Stieglitz's shadow. Virginia Woolf speaks to such figurative deterrents, writing that women "still [have] many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time, [she] think[s], before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be a slain, a rock to be dashed against" (Woolf). O'Keeffe had many ghosts to fight. As a writer, her biggest ghost was herself. Painting and drawing came naturally to her. Writing did not. She regularly expressed this to Stieglitz. Still, her largest ghost, her 'angel of the house' was him. He was O'Keeffe's phantom Catch-22. She cared about his opinion, for he loved her and was the primary promoter of her work. In O'Keeffe's letter to Pollitzer about Stieglitz in October of 1915, she writes, "If I ever make any thing that satisfies me even ever so little-I am going to show it to

[Stieglitz] to find out if it's any good" (O'Keeffe, "Lovingly, Georgia," 40). She values his opinion more than anyone else. Self-conscious creation is bittersweet. Sometimes it produces the best work. The fear is that it can leave a creator perplexed, depressed, a mountain of dried paintbrushes and crumpled pieces of paper in a trash bin. Perhaps the distance between O'Keeffe and Stieglitz allowed her the autonomy to create. She was able to express her anxiety on paper without being forced to confront Stieglitz's opinions in person upon completion of each work.

### **The Dash-O'Keeffe's Waving Weapon**

*Words are only frames. No comfortable conclusion. Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks.* -Susan Howe in her essay "These Flames and Generosities of Heart"

Throughout O'Keeffe's letters, her use of punctuation is expressive. It disrupts "conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language" (Denman). The dash is like a brush that allows her to build and take away, to separate, connect, and control language.

The dash can stop a thought; connect a phrase, build new interrelationships between words. The dash is O'Keeffe's unconscious on page. Her dash, unlike the one in Greenough's typed copy, is curly: a wave-like line nestled among language. O'Keeffe falls back on it, whether as a placeholder while she constructs her next thought or as a period. It is punctuation that Dickinson scholar Kamilla Denman calls "on the level of this world" (Denman).<sup>6</sup> The dash does not have a personality of

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<sup>6</sup> As there is virtually no literary analysis on Georgia O'Keeffe's syntax and language, I utilize scholarship on Emily Dickinson and apply it to O'Keeffe's writing. Dickinson's poetry relies on facsimile as a tool, just like that of O'Keeffe.

its own. Unlike a period or exclamation point, it exists in between words. O'Keeffe rarely uses the period, relying on the readers interpretation of the dash to conclude her sentences. The dash is a connector placed by the writer, an extension of the human psyche, many times conveying a duality of meaning that acts as language's own metronome. Denman contrasts the dash with the exclamation point, a mark that O'Keeffe almost never uses. Her excitement comes from layering words and color, evoking a feeling through language rather than a sentence marker.

In love letters, full of passionate discourse and hidden meaning, the dash is crucial. In her letters to Stieglitz during the latter part of 1916 to the consummation of their relationship in 1918, O'Keeffe's use of the dash changed. In earlier letters, she is fragile, hesitant about her family, her job, and most importantly, her place as an artist. Leaving Stieglitz aside, one's 20s exist in hyperconscious vacuum. They are about trying new things, meeting new people; they are about falling in love. As O'Keeffe gets more comfortable with Stieglitz, the dash and her language becomes more overtly sexual, more pointed-more candid. In a letter to Stieglitz in October of 1916, O'Keeffe acknowledges Stieglitz's feelings for her.

You do not hurt me-I don't know that you could-It's that you give me so much of yourself-sometimes it overpowers me-This morning-I hesitated-I feel it so much it is too much like walking on your named soul-It is too much a privilege (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 43).

In this passage, the dash fluctuates between acting as a period and editor. It edits, allowing O'Keeffe to catch her breath and conceptualize her next thought. In such an intimate passage, it works in tandem with careful syntax. Denman says Dickinson' use of the dash "creates a poetry whose interpretation become a process of decoding the way each fragment signals meaning" (Denman). The same can be said

for O’Keeffe. Her separation of each phrase forces Stieglitz to contemplate every combination of six or seven words. What is the “it” that overpowers O’Keeffe? Is it own Stieglitz’s forward language; his sharing of intimate details that weigh on her soul? The dash also makes us contemplate the phrase “named soul.” Is “named soul” a metaphor for Stieglitz’s notoriety in the art world? I think it is O’Keeffe’s attempt to identify his feelings for her. With the phrase “named soul,” O’Keeffe references a letter Stieglitz wrote her two weeks prior on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1916.

There is nothing I need to hide-nothing that I fear might be misunderstood-there is no consciousness of anything but a common understanding no matter how much we way differ-And so I feel it is with you. (Stieglitz, “My Faraway One,” 37)

He is being completely open with her. He is naming his soul in a roundabout way, connecting them. His use of the dash works more as a period or comma, a way to separate phrases and breathe. Ultimately, his dash is different than that of O’Keeffe.

One way to appreciate O’Keeffe’s use of the dash is to compare a passage of hers with and without it. The passage to the right is from a letter O’Keeffe wrote to Stieglitz in June of 1917, the day before 291 closed its doors for good.

<u>With Dash</u>	<u>Without Dash</u>
So again tonight-I don’t know if it’s a woman or little girl-I am mostly both-I want to put my arms around you-kiss you-let you kiss me-It’s all very quiet-what I want is very quiet-It’s great to trust anyone enough to let them kiss you-Tomorrow is the last day of the Little Gallery-There is still a little room. (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 167)	So again tonight I don’t know if it’s a woman or little girl I am mostly both I want to put my arms around you kiss you let you kiss me It’s all very quiet what I want is very quiet It’s great to trust anyone enough to let them kiss you Tomorrow is the last day of the Little Gallery There is still a little room.

The passage falls just before she says her final goodnight. By now, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz had been corresponding for 18 months and were comfortable sharing their romantic feelings towards each other.

Without the dash in the passage above, the reader determines the rhythm of the sentence. Language blends together, with no delineation for where to breathe or hold onto a phrase. It is much more challenging to read without O’Keeffe’s specific punctuation. It makes the reader want to put in periods, stop her language short. The dash allows the momentum of the phrase to continue, to build rather than start from scratch. It also helps individual phrases stand out like specific elements of a painting. Without the dash, the passionate rush and ambiguity of language is lost. Her words fall flat.

The dash shapes the musical arc of a sentence, allowing intimate moments to sing. In *The Art of Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song*, Ellen Bryant Voigt identifies how markers in music such as “dynamics, harmony, melody line, variations in rhythm” also exist in language (Voigt 10). The musicality of O’Keeffe’s dash creates a disjointed, breathless intimacy. In a letter to Stieglitz in January of 1917 she codes her letter, using the word “certain” to convey a secret undercurrent between them. She writes, “I too only like certain kinds of kisses-certain kinds of touches-I cannot understand the other kinds of kisses-I can the other kinds of touches-there is something pathetic about them” (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 99). The dash in this sentences releases a simultaneous crescendo and ritardando. It builds the emotional stakes by singling out Stieglitz; she suggests that only he knows what her intention. The dash allows us to breathe with O’Keeffe and to feel the tension on the page. There is poignancy to the word “certain” that conveys an intimacy between her and Stieglitz.



Stacey D'Erasmus speaks to the kind of intimacy O'Keeffe creates in her letters. D'Erasmus identifies intimacy as the "textual *where* of their meetings...locutions, places in language that they share-[that] actually produces not only opportunities for intimacy, but also the actual sense of intimacy" (D'Erasmus 12-13). By withholding further detail on the certain kinds of kisses and touches she prefers, O'Keeffe builds the bridge of tenderness between her and Stieglitz. She does this through using "too;" they both like the same "certain kinds of touches" and "kisses." More so, they want to kiss and touch each other. The repetition of "certain" adds a musicality to the line, a layered minor cord. She is beginning to speak a language only he can understand. Through her fragmented, encoded fragments, O'Keeffe develops her own style. We learn how to understand her dash, each passage becoming more enjoyable with each read.

### **The Artist-Writer Hybrid**

*And we have pictures or whatever you wish to call them which are different from anything we have ever seen. They make us feel a bigness-something that Art always does-a religious intensity-and satisfies our aesthetic experience.- Alfred Stieglitz describing O'Keeffe's work in his 1919 essay "A Woman on Paper," reprinted in Dorothy Norman's Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer*

O'Keeffe writes like a painter. She sketches with words. We see a melding of talents, both in her attempts to describe daily life as well as her painting process. In this section I explore O'Keeffe's writing on the artistic process as well as her various artistic writing techniques.

O'Keeffe's creative process was not only influenced by Stieglitz but also by Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). It was Stieglitz who first introduced O'Keeffe to the words of Kandinsky by inadvertently publishing

selections of his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in an issue of his magazine *Camera Work* in 1912. Kandinsky greatly influenced O'Keeffe's writing and artistic process. O'Keeffe was an avid reader of Stieglitz's magazine, whose inaugural issue came out in January of 1903, two months or so after O'Keeffe's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Both Pollitzer and O'Keeffe were avid readers of *Camera Work*, regularly exchanging their thoughts on its content, particularly the work of Kandinsky.

Kandinsky writes about a soul-searching quality in art that exists in O'Keeffe's artistic process and writing. He specifies in his chapter on "Art and Artists" how to execute the process of creation.

Painting is an art, and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which much be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul-to, in fact-the raising of the spiritual triangle (Kandinsky 54).

Kandinsky sees painting as a means of reaching transcendence; he paints to explore and connect with his soul. He is talking about the profound and making art about human condition. O'Keeffe employs this talent in her letter writing as well as her painting. O'Keeffe could not have known in her early letters that they would be published. She was not attempting to elevate the consciousness or romanticism of her reader. Her words, while obviously meant for Stieglitz, seem to have a larger purpose. She seems to be working towards expressing the innermost elements of her soul.

One of the most beautiful elements of O'Keeffe's writing is the way she writes about art and her take on the world. It is fresh, curious, and memorable, burning like a candle. She loved nature and being out West, walking miles into canyons and challenging herself to stay in shape and explore the world. She writes in a letter to

her employee Maria Chabot in 1941, “What one sees from the air is so simple and so beautiful I cannot help feeling that it would do something wonderful for the human race” (O’Keeffe, “Words | Works”). It’s no wonder she lived to be 98 years old!

Before O’Keeffe gained notoriety for her painting, her writing explored her feelings and inhibitions about art. In a letter to Pollitzer in October 1915, O’Keeffe questions the basis of art. She writes, “Do you think we can ever get much of it in Art-I don’t know-anything about anything-and Anita I’m afraid I never will” (O’Keeffe, “Lovingly Georgia,” 60). O’Keeffe’s language has an ease when she writes to Pollitzer. She is more honest about her vulnerabilities than in her letters to Stieglitz, expressing them directly rather than with coded punctuation and hidden messages. She articulates the inward hesitancy normally expressed by the dash in actual words.

There is one element of this passage that O’Keeffe leaves amorphous. She asks if she can ever get much of “it” in art. The illusive “it” could refer to an earlier portion of the letter where she talks about the connections of music and color. Perhaps she is talking about how she rarely experiences synesthesia with music and her art. This is unlikely. O’Keeffe starts a new paragraph here. Her use of “it” feels like a substitution for satisfaction. She is hesitant about her talent, questioning if she will ever be able to create anything worthy of Stieglitz, of her high standards for herself. Even though she does not know “anything about anything,” she wants more.

O’Keeffe capitalizes “Art” in her letter to Pollitzer. She places it on high pedestal and fears she will never satisfy her need to create. As one of her bittersweet muses, Stieglitz played a part in O’Keeffe’s understanding of art and how

she formalized her conception of art. In a letter in Stieglitz in November of 1916, she writes about a sudden urge to paint.

Tonight I'd like to paint the world with a broom-and I think I'd like great buckets of color like Hartley's to start with-lots of red-vermillion-and I don't want to be careful of the floor-I just want to splash (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 58)

O'Keeffe invokes the five senses in this passage, fusing spontaneity with intense energy. We hear the splatter of paint on the wall, the splash of red. We smell of oil paint. We can see the wrinkles of O'Keeffe's palm outlined in red paint in a corner of the wall. We feel her pulse quicken, tasting her breathless energy. O'Keeffe starts the passage off with two long sentences, ending each with preposition. She makes a declarative statement and then builds on it. "Tonight I'd like to paint the world with a broom" creates a feeling of contemplation. O'Keeffe follows it with an "I think" statement. She is revving up, getting more excited by the prospect. This kind of slowness contrasts with the dash-enclosed

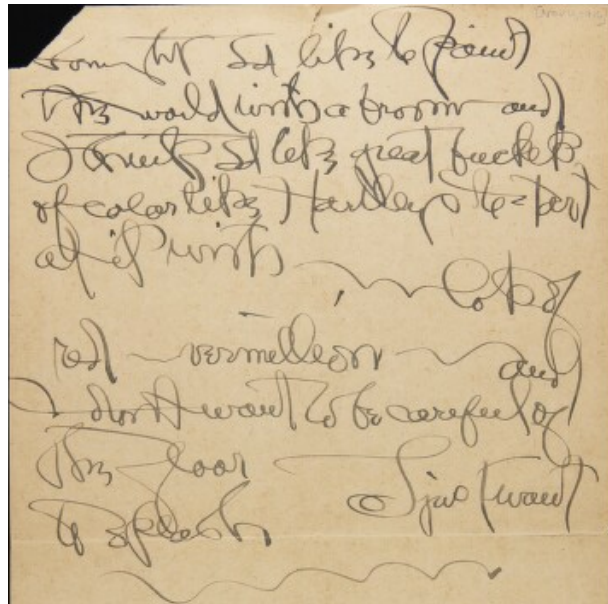


Figure 5-An excerpt from the November 4, 1917 letter in O'Keeffe's hand.

phrases of "lots of red" and "vermillion" to create a rushed sensation. The passage is a run-on sentence, the dash acting as a catch-up breath. The pen is her brush.

O'Keeffe is painting and writing simultaneously, the pen and the brush fusing at her command. Her passion is strong, her intention known.

O’Keeffe creates a description that mirrors what is inside her head. Writer Mark Doty describes such descriptive writing as “the mind playing over the world of matter, finding there a glass various and lustrous enough to reflect back the complexities of self that’s doing the looking” (Doty 33). Doty’s commentary illuminates the ability to create an image with words that is just as strong as something on canvas. He still leaving room for interpretation and the reader’s own “mind over matter” (Doty 33). O’Keeffe expresses a feeling, passion pushing against a world that could just swallow her whole. She is a conqueror. O’Keeffe feels a sort of careless spontaneity and wants to get it out on paper and wall, with pen and broom. The run-on nature of the sentence makes you ignore the dash. She is careless but intentional-her messy nature allows her to break free from censoring voice of ‘The Angel of the House.’ The reader feels O’Keeffe’s excitement. Together we paint the wall, the spindly bristles of the broom hitting up against the canvas. Finally, exhausted, we collapse with her, splashing about in her passion.

O’Keeffe is passionate about painting the world red. She had emotional connections to color, influenced by Kandinsky’s chapter on color in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He writes, “Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul” (Kandinsky 25). Just as O’Keeffe pushes the bristles of her broom against the world, Kandinsky’s fingers caress the keys. Her broom and his piano are metaphors to convey their passion about painting. They both feel a synesthesia of color and music. Compare Kandinsky’s words to a letter O’Keeffe wrote to Pollitzer in October of 1915.

You asked me about music-I like it better than anything in the world-Color gives me the same thrill once in a long long time-I can almost remember and count the times-It is usually just the outdoors or the flowers-or a person-sometimes a story-or something that will call a picture to my mind-will affect me like music (O'Keeffe, "Lovingly Georgia," 60)

Kandinsky and O'Keeffe's ideas about the metaphoric connection between music and color sing in harmony. Kandinsky's passage about the keyboard has a legato crescendo to them. There are not any rests breaking up his words. In her letter to Pollitzer, O'Keeffe thoughts are pianissimo, broken up by tiny eighth rests. She is building her sentences like Kandinsky. Her ideas about color and music are not as drawn out. There is an unknown here. We are made to flesh out the images she conjures up. One of Stieglitz's first reactions to O'Keeffe's work speaks to her talent melding music and color. In his 1919 essay "Woman in Art," written for artist S. Macdonald Wright, Stieglitz says that "O'Keeffe has the sense of Color in the modern acceptance of the word Color-it is part of her very self-as music is a part of the Composer" (Stieglitz, "Woman in Art"). Here he talks about a quality of control in O'Keeffe's art, which exists in her writing. Her hesitance with language makes specific words stand out. She turns single colors into poems, all with the flick of her pen-brush hybrid. She forces Stieglitz to acknowledge this, who really appreciates O'Keeffe not so much for her place as an artist but rather as a *woman artist*.

O'Keeffe is a strong description writer. In her writing, there are three different types of metaphorical passages: oil, charcoal, and watercolor. She creates each of these passages like she would paint them; her only tools a pen and paper. In each type of passage, she sketches slowly, parsing out each color and sound, allowing them to move, but move in harmony. Oil painting conveys strength, age,

and color, the visceral elements of a passage bursting off the page with passion.

Charcoal painting is sensual, nuanced, combining dexterity with the hesitant.

Watercolor is light, shy, and without boundaries.

O’Keeffe utilizes her oil technique in her description writing. In a letter dated February 4, 1917, she describes a spring day to Stieglitz.

It is like a wonderful spring day in Virginia-when the air feels as if you take handfuls of it and toss it about-and the woods-black tree trunks-wonderful green-sunshine-violets everywhere-birds-and such sunshine-slow and dreamy (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 103).

Very few writers can describe landscape by simply naming a color. In the February 1915 letter where O’Keeffe references her struggle with words, she mentions to Stieglitz how she went “color mad-but [that she] almost hated to think of color since the fall went” (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 4). O’Keeffe has gone *color mad* here, experiencing a visceral flooding of the senses. Every nerve is exposed, sensitive to the slight variations of color in her surroundings. O’Keeffe builds with oil paint, thick, languid word strokes that meld into one another. The scene is visceral. The reader is not sure whether O’Keeffe is describing the lush green grass and leaves or if in an extraordinary, exciting way, the “wonderful green-sunshine” is lighting up the sky. The separation between the words simultaneously creates a pause and also allows us to experiment with relationships between words. They are forced to make connections, to think about word placement. Like green sunshine, what if the woods were black? Is the sunshine slow and dreamy? O’Keeffe’s letters often lead me to place her in the scenes she creates. I imagine her lying on a picnic blanket, taking in the moment. The tangibility of her writing also allow us to place ourselves in her scenes, as well as compare her words to her artwork.

O’Keeffe’s description of the Virginian landscape provides an interesting comparison to her painting “Lake George Early Moonrise,” from 1930. Although the painting is of Lake George, NY and 15 years older than the letter, here too the trees vibrate with “slow and dreamy sunshine,” executed through thick,



Figure 6-“Lake George Early Moonrise,” 1930

creamy brushstrokes. The scene glistens in green. The atmosphere relaxes us. We feel as if we can grasp handfuls of air in the hazy blending of yellow and green. O’Keeffe makes her viewer want to reach their hand out and catch a ball of air. Like the passage in the letter, the scene breathes with life. She is able to sketch out her work not just through paint but also words. She sees the world as a painting, obvious through her syntax.

O’Keeffe often compared color and words. She found that color and shape on canvas shared a story better than words on a page. In a statement in 1976, O’Keeffe said “the meaning of a word-to me-is not exact as a meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words” (O’Keeffe “Words | Works”). She reaches for particular words and descriptions like she looks for a specific green in her meticulous color palette. In the passage concerning the playful air and “sunshine-slow and dreamy” of her Virginian surroundings, she is oil painting with quick, deliberate strokes, exploring line and color and drama of color madness (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 103). Her senses heightened, she sees the landscape in



her head and articulates it through the simple statement of colors and objects. These kinds of passages are exciting as we are included in O’Keeffe’s creative process, experiencing more than just the finished product.

O’Keeffe’s second writing strength is analogous to watercolor painting, a skill she developed in her early teens. Watercolor writing is synonymous with the intimacy of language, of light touch and ambiguity. The sweet hesitancy of watercolor exists in O’Keeffe’s early letters to Pollitzer about Stieglitz. She constantly attempts to describe her exact feelings. It comes in the early stages of her writing, when she is just starting to convey an idea or thought, a desire that with hinges on colorful, amorphous feelings. The letter to Pollitzer about seeking Stieglitz’s approval is a strong example of her watercolor technique.

Anita-do you know- believe I would rather have Stieglitz like some thing- anything I had done-than anyone else I know of-I have always thought that-If I ever make any thing that satisfies me even ever so little-I am going to show it to him to find out if it’s any good-Don’t you often wish you could make something he might like? (O’Keeffe, “Lovingly, Georgia,” 40)

In the passage above, she paints with a thin line, pressing lightly on the page. She does not want to give too much of herself away. The color is light, amorphous and indeterminate. O’Keeffe constantly stops and starts herself. Every four words there is a dash. The passage hesitates because she is not quite sure what she wants from Stieglitz. She is also afraid to admit her feelings for him and his grandeur. There is a hint of sexual yearning for Stieglitz here, but not a strong enough pang to warrant any kind of definition in this passage. Her passion is tentative, lukewarm, sweet, and light, just like her technique on paper.

O’Keeffe’s watercolors are so effortless and simple, a blend of shape, color, and water. The hazy elements O’Keeffe’s passage to Stieglitz, the hiccupped fragments created by the dash, exist in the boundary lines between earth and mountain in her painting “Pink and Green Mountains No. 1,” from 1917. This painting is sweet, hazy, and unsure of itself just like O’Keeffe is in her letter. It is also worthy of comparison as does not immediately



Figure 7-“Pink and Green Mountains No.1,” 1917

conjure up a Freudian analysis. The viewer is not immediately presented with abstracted, female genitalia. More than anything, color helps speak to O’Keeffe’s indeterminate feelings in both the painting and her letter to Stieglitz.

O’Keeffe’s third and final paint-pen hybrid is her charcoal technique. Charcoal is sensual and tactile-it leaves its remnants on your hands and clothes. The edges of a charcoal drawing are constantly fading with touch. In an early letter to Stieglitz O’Keeffe writes, “I want to touch someone I like-then maybe I could be still-but-I don’t suppose I could-“ (O’Keeffe, “My Faraway One,” 35). The dash here suggests deep contemplation. She creates incomplete fragments, starting a thought and then digressing. What does she mean by touch? What kind of touches does she like? And why does she need to be still? The dash is important to her vulnerability, conveying her hesitance in their burgeoning relationship.

In the letter below from January of 1917, O'Keeffe writes to Stieglitz about her displeasure with how her dates treat her in Texas.

He only wanted to touch me because I was a woman-I distinctly did not want to be touched because he wasn't a particular man. And still wanted to put my arm round him and my hand on his cheek because he was so everlasting man-and I was sorry-and he wouldn't understand (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 99).

This passage contains a pointed intimacy. O'Keeffe's language here is "uniquely suited to holding open the simultaneous possibility that an event is occurring and not occurring" (D'Erasmus 12). She establishes the concept that she has feelings for Stieglitz. We are unsure if the "event" she discusses in her writing is admittance that he is the "particular man." Her use of "distinctly" serves as emphasis. It gives her words what Mark Doty calls a "sonic texture," breaking up the musicality of the phrase to get to the flesh of the sentence (Doty 117). The flesh of the sentence exists in two places: one where she identifies the concept of the "particular man" and the other where she yearns for an "everlasting man." O'Keeffe uses words such as "particular" and "distinctly" to establish a rhythm with the passage, a repetitive couplet that builds until O'Keeffe brings the music to a close. It expresses a sense of undefined closeness, a music whose melody only speaks to Stieglitz. Reading the letter, we can add harmony, our own memories of the particular men and women in our lives. O'Keeffe creates space for the question of the "particular man," leaving "room for that which must remain indeterminate; they somehow manage to acknowledge the fact of limit" which Doty discusses (Doty 126). The language itself is the boundary line, the "limit," that O'Keeffe uses. She will go no further in her

description. We believe this man to be Stieglitz, though O’Keeffe had many admirers in her life before Stieglitz and after.<sup>7</sup>

The question of the particulars, the identity of O’Keeffe’s favorite touches and kisses, provides a sensuous intrigue that extends beyond the vaginal Freudian analysis of O’Keeffe’s sexuality through her art. And yet, O’Keeffe in her writing fights against these categories, creating a hybridity of meaning. Through her use of the dash, she conveys what Kandinsky calls “a definite and indefinite impression on the soul, [producing] spiritual harmony,” (Kandinsky 28). We are not meant to read between the lines but rather appreciate the unknown. Like in her art, O’Keeffe never means to convey a specific message about her sexuality or place in feminism. She wants us to explore the abstract with her, the fuzzy edges of her flowers.

This passage is one of many examples of O’Keeffe using coding and ambiguous language to create a space of intimacy between her and Stieglitz. What makes the above passage soar is the phrase “everlasting man.” Out of context, the phrase conjures up a Christ-like image, a man for whom seas part and worlds turn over. And yet, what O’Keeffe recreates is the intoxicating feeling of masculine energy. This passage is one of my favorites. It reminds me of an early O’Keeffe charcoal drawing hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled “Drawing XIII,” from 1915. The drawing is sexy, a void opening up into sharp, triangular edges, and wavy, negative space. The waves remind me of O’Keeffe’s dash. The drawing conjures up the same feeling O’Keeffe evokes in the passage about the “particular

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<sup>7</sup> Photographer Paul Strand and Columbia Professor Arthur McMahon wrote to O’Keeffe in the late 1910’s, expressing their deep affections for her spontaneous, outdoorswoman spirit and individuality. During her courtship with both Strand and McMahon, O’Keeffe wrote to Stieglitz, which made him quite jealous.

man.” We remember the burn on one’s face after kissing for hours; the feeling of chapped lips and internal burn that comes from sheer attraction. Her words glow,



Figure 8- "Drawing XIII," 1915

reverberating with sexual energy. She is able to take two simple words and conjure up memories spent kissing on couches and starting longingly across a room. You do not have to be in love to want someone. She creates “a “slipstream of sensation” on paper (Doty 21). We remember desperately wanting contact, inherent attraction; even when it’s not with the “particular person.”

Soon after they began their correspondence

Stieglitz encouraged O’Keeffe to stop using charcoal

as her primary means of creation because he thought it was too amateur. As such, her charcoal technique slowly left her writing. The more she wrote to him, the more comfortable she became. The hybridity of O’Keeffe’s painter-writer techniques give a synesthetic experience. We as the reader appreciate both the language and the mental images created by O’Keeffe fragmented, sensual style. We get to see the process and the finished product in a simultaneous, flurried creation.

### **The Erotic-O’Keeffe’s break from the linguistically hesitant**

*We take for granted, as Sappho did, the sweetness of erotic desire; its pleurability smiles out at us. But the bitterness is less obvious-* Anne Carson in her book *Eros: the Bittersweet*

As her relationship with Stieglitz blossomed, O’Keeffe got increasingly comfortable with a sexual, sensuous writing style. In May of 1922, O’Keeffe visited

friends in York Beach, Maine after an uncomfortable stint at Stieglitz's family home in Lake George. During the visit with Stieglitz she had felt "weighed down by the burdens of managing the large household of visitors at Lake George, she had little time to paint" and for a long time felt uninspired (Greenough 316). Her trip to Maine was one of the first times she and Stieglitz had been apart since becoming lovers in 1918. They began writing letters like they had done earlier in their relationship. Distance had a way of bringing intimacy into their relationship and exporting it onto the page. O'Keeffe's writing soon broke from the definition *love letters*. They soon contained elements of lust letters.

On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1922, she starts her day by writing a letter to Stieglitz. At first all seems calm. O'Keeffe describes the beauty of quiet, taking in the landscape. She describes "the wind [blowing] in waves across the green grass of the field out there," the sun warm on her back (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 333). Then things change rapidly. All of a sudden O'Keeffe is lying on her back, filled with intense desire. She describes herself as "wanting to be spread apart, to die with the sense of [him]" (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 334). She explores the polarity of her feelings, as she attempts to get to the center. The letter is pornographically stunning, a tremendous turn on.

You have given me-the circle of the most painfully intense pleasure-most painfully intense pleasure-The circle with two centers-each touching each other-The mathematical impossibility of the situation is probably nature's reason for the particularly keen pleasure she affords when mathematically impossible happens.

I must work-I'm in a state that I could write about this all day (O'Keeffe, "My Faraway One," 334).

This letter is laden  
with imagery of  
the circle, of  
getting to the

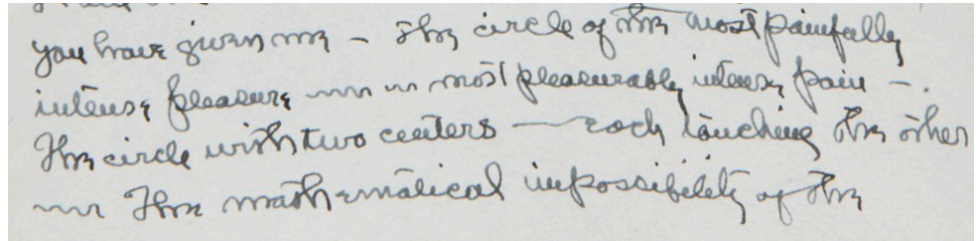


Figure 9-An excerpt from the May 16, 1922 letter in O'Keeffe's hand

center, of reaching orgasm. O'Keeffe writes in circles. Each time she reuses a phrase or word her sensitivity heightens. She breathes deeper; her focus becomes sharper. The phrase “the circle with two centers” conjures an image of a melded soul. And yet, it is impossible to conceptualize. O'Keeffe draws out this idea, with the phrase “mathematically impossible.” She compares achieving orgasm to the mathematically impossible, using a harsh, six-syllable adverb to express her deepest excitement. It is a strange way to describe souls coming together, and yet, when the passage is over, the accompanied deep sigh of relief comes with a sort of sexual satisfaction.

Stacy D'Erasmus discusses the primal poetics of erotica and stimulation as a form of escapism, a representation of “a larger, even a much larger, consciousness” (D'Erasmus 27). In this passage, O'Keeffe unconsciously lets go of many of her inhibitions about writing and let's herself free-fall. This idea is evident is the final element of the passage. O'Keeffe forces herself to go to work, to channel her sexual energy and passion into her primary outlet of creativity, painting. She acknowledges that she has tremendous feelings about Stieglitz and wants to express them through words, through letters to him. This is one of the first times O'Keeffe admits to enjoying writing, the craft the construction, the medium. She is not only sexually, but linguistically satisfied.

Stieglitz challenged O’Keeffe consciousness through his love of her work and body. He placed her in the public eye through the lens of sexual pleasure. A contemporary article on O’Keeffe’s work called “Out of the Erotic Ghetto,” claims that O’Keeffe never escaped the erotic box of public interpretation. Journalist Jerry Saltz writes that “Twenty-three years later [after her death], many continue to dismiss [O’Keeffe] as a prissy painter of pretty pictures—or, [he] should say, pretty genitalia” (Saltz). O’Keeffe is so much more than a “painter of pretty pictures.” She’s a writer, a sensuous and intricate person on both page and canvas. What these letters, whether focused on the creative process or the erotic, prove is that the ‘woman on paper’ stereotype is not a negative concept. O’Keeffe utilizes her femininity and sexuality to produce strong writing. In her erotic writing, the metaphorical use of the circle is strong. The reader is able to break the fourth wall and experience O’Keeffe’s process with her.



## Conclusion: The 'Woman on Paper' Phenomena

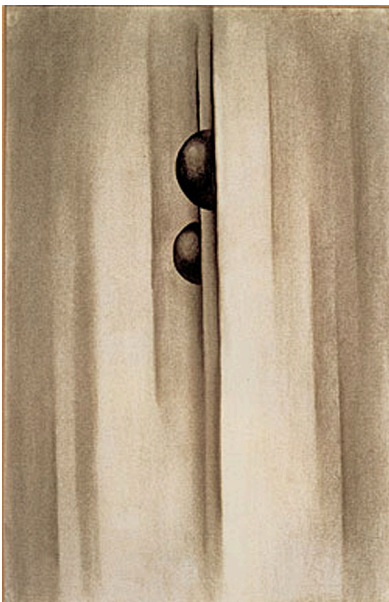
*She's an unusual woman-She's broad minded, She's bigger than most women, but she's got the sensitive emotion-I'd know she was a woman-Look at that line.*-Alfred Stieglitz talking about O'Keefe's charcoal drawings to his assistant, copied in a letter from Anita Pollitzer to Georgia O'Keeffe, January 1, 1916.

In the title of my thesis, I utilize Stieglitz's first impression of O'Keeffe's work, his proclamation of the 'the woman on paper.' It is true that O'Keeffe's artwork is tied up in her identity as a woman. So is her writing. The way she writes to Stieglitz cannot be separated from her female identity. I think O'Keeffe's letters are strong because they are "definite and indefinite impression [of her] soul" (Kandinsky 28). In each dash, in each hybrid word choice, we feel O'Keeffe on the page. There is a homeostasis of self when she writes-a relaxation, a breath of freedom. Still, there is a difference between being a soulful writer exploring the bonds of her sexuality and female identity and being a *woman writer*. O'Keeffe is so much more than a 'woman on paper,' if being a woman on paper means an expression of stark, female sexuality alone. She has the skill to invoke a sense of emotion and connection traditionally associated with the female mind and body. And yet, she can do many other things well. She's a strong, descriptive writer, an eloquent eroticist, a writer that has her own style and technique. After reading many O'Keeffe letters, you start to pick up her curving, fragmented style.

If nothing else, O'Keeffe's writing should be read for more than just historical verification. She has the ability to create beautiful word paintings, showing her reader her creative process along the way. She also pushes the genre of letter writing into the realm of the literary.

O’Keeffe rarely gave interviews. She wanted her work to speak for itself rather than remediations of her work given in old age. The two works she published late in life are less about showcasing her writing and more about memorializing O’Keeffe in old age. She hardly uses the dash in *Some Memories of Drawing*. There is a hint of spark, a spark that comes from her reflection process, from O’Keeffe remembering the beginning of her relationship with Stieglitz and revisiting early paintings and letters.

In *Some Memories of Drawings*, O’Keeffe uses a three-sentence phrase to describe one of her most famous charcoals, “Drawing No. 17,” from 1919. The page before the drawing is blank except for the phrase “No comments, please” (O’Keeffe, *Some Memories of Drawing*). O’Keeffe speaks here for both the general public as well



**Figure 10-**“Drawing No. 17,” 1919

as herself. Perhaps she wants her painted language to speak on its own. She wants to rid herself of all the trappings Stieglitz and his kin placed upon her. She is finished.

Georgia O’Keeffe never meant for her letters to be analyzed as literature. She wanted them to be read, evident in the Greenough commission in 1981, but never for their language. She knew what an addition

they would to her legacy, the love story of two famous artists memorialized by their own hand. Still she never meant to be read as a writer. Her request for “No Comments, Please” is for a clear, appreciative audience. O’Keeffe

gave us so much in her art, in her letters, in her language. Take in O’Keeffe’s words and appreciate them. That’s all she could have asked for.

## **Acknowledgements**

So many people helped in conceiving this thesis and getting me to the point in both my education and life where I could conceptualize writing one. I first want to thank Vassar’s Academic Enrichment Fund for providing me with the opportunity to visit Georgia O’Keeffe’s home and museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico this past August. The research I did while there was invaluable. I’d also like to thank the Eumie Imm-Stroukoff and her staff at the Georgia O’Keeffe Research Center for their help during my visit.

Thank you to Beth Darlington for encouraging me to take Art 105-106, claiming it was “necessary for my soul.” You were right. Thank you to Dan Peck for his many books and thoughts on O’Keeffe. Thank you to Patricia Wallace, a tremendous advisor and editor, whose guidance and support was invaluable throughout this process.

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Thank you to Sarah Greenough for dedicating your life to editing these letters. And finally, to Georgia O’Keeffe, for having the foresight to memorialize these incredible letters and for sharing them with the public.

## Appendix

**Cover Page-** Stieglitz, Alfred. *Georgia O'Keeffe-Hands*, circa 1919. Gelatin silver print, 9-7/16 x 7-1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation.

**Figure 1-**Chabot, Maria. *Georgia O'Keeffe Writing Daily Letter to Alfred Stieglitz*. Ghost Ranch Patio, 1944. Black and white photograph. 5x 3 in. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum (RC-2001-002-113). Gift of the Maria Chabot Literary Trust. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

**Figure 2-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz. 21 Dec. 1916. Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Digital Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. Web.

**Figure 3-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz. 29 June 1917. Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Digital Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. Web.

**Figure 4-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz. 1 Feb. 1916. Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Digital Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. Web.

**Figure 5-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz. 4 Nov. 1917. Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Digital Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. Web.

**Figure 6-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Lake George Early Moonrise*. 1930. Oil painting.

**Figure 7-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Pink and Green Mountains, No. 1*. 1917. Watercolor on paper. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas.

**Figure 8-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Drawing XIII*. 1915. Charcoal on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

**Figure 9-** O'Keeffe, Georgia. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz. 16 May 1922. Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Digital Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. Web.

**Figure 10-** O'Keeffe, Georgia, *Drawing No. 17*, 1919. Charcoal on laid paper, 19-3/4 x 12-3/4 inches. Courtesy of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Gift of The Burnett Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation.

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