

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***The Newton Letter* (1982)**

John Banville

### OVERVIEW

The book employs an experimental form – using an epistolary or letter form, flashbacks, and also an unreliable narrator – to tell the story of a fictitious scholar, biographer, and historian who is intending to write a biography of the scientist Isaac Newton. The biographer rents a small lodge in the south of Ireland where he sets out to write his biography of Newton beginning with an analysis of a letter Newton sent to John Locke in 1693 which is an important year in the life of Newton as it was the year of his infamous mental collapse. The biographer – whose name we never learn – struggles to work on his book as his own life becomes ever more embroiled in the lives of three people living in the lodge: Otilie Grainger, her aunt Charlotte Lawless and Charlotte's husband Edward. They appear mysterious and the biographer gradually becomes more interested in their lives than in the life of Newton.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Isaac Newton [1642-1727] was one of the most famous scientists who ever lived. His numerous publications on various scientific subjects such as optics, gravity, and motion became so influential in the western world that a whole period of scientific experimentation from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century became heavily influenced by his laws of motion and what became known as Newtonian or Classical mechanics. Newton wrote a famous letter to the great English philosopher John Locke in 1693 in which he accused Locke of having "endeavoured to embroil me with women". This letter becomes the centrepiece of Banville's novella. It is perhaps a little ironic that this letter should express Newton's great fear of women since the novella's unreliable narrator also gets distracted from his great work – his book on Newton – precisely because he becomes embroiled in the lives of the women living at Fern House.

It should also be noted that Charlotte, Otilie and Edward are the names of the three main characters of Goethe's 1809 novel *Elective Affinities*.

Banville adapted the novella for film. Kevin Billington directed the 1984 production called *Reflections* that had Gabriel Byrne as the unreliable narrator and also starred Harriet Walter and Fionnula Flanagan.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Newton	The renowned seventeenth and early eighteenth-century scientist. Newton does not appear in the novel but his influence and his work guide the reflections of his biographer.
Narrator	The narrator is not named. He is renting a lodge or cottage on the grounds of Fern House to write a biography of Isaac Newton.
Charlotte Lawless	The daughter of the original owner of Fern House.
Otilie	The niece of Charlotte. Otilie is an orphan. Her parents died in a car crash when she was 10.
Edward	The husband of Charlotte.
Michael	The son of Otilie.
Mr. Prunty	A business man who offers to buy Fern House and lands from Edward
Clio (short for Cliona)	The story is told by way of a series of letters that the unnamed narrator writes to his friend Clio.

## PLOT

[Note: While the novel is told largely through flashbacks retold through letters that the unnamed narrator writes to a friend named Clio, the following is a chronological summary of the main events as described in the letters]

## SCIENTIST

*Newton Letter of 1693* The narrator shares his recollections of the famous letter Newton sent to Locke in 1693. Newton had accused the great philosopher out of the blue of being “immoral” and of having tried to “embroil him with women”. The narrator recalls how Newton signed off the letter with “*I am your most humble and unfortunate servant, Is. Newton*”. However, a few weeks earlier Newton had signed off another letter to Locke with just his surname. The narrator asks himself what had happened to their relationship in the interim.

*Newton’s mental breakdown* He starts to reflect on why Newton had gone through a nervous breakdown in 1693. He puts it down to the fact that Newton had recently turned 50 and that he had realised that all of his greatest scientific work was behind him and felt a lack of direction. The narrator then compares his own situation with that of Newton. The narrator only has to tie up a few loose ends and write a conclusion and his book will be finished. But as he focuses on the two letters that reveal Newton’s mental breakdown, he also feels some lack of direction and is no longer able to finish the book.

*Fictional fire* The narrator discusses in his letter to Clio an unsubstantiated story about Newton’s dog overturning a candle in Newton’s rooms in Cambridge. The accident started a fire that destroyed all of Newton’s papers. The narrator acknowledges that the story is most likely fictional but he likes to imagine how it might be based on truth.

## WRITER

*Frustration* The unnamed biographer is writing to his friend Clio after his excursion to Ferns. She has written a letter (that we do not see) asking about his whereabouts. The narrator tells her he has not had some kind of breakdown. This is a reference to the infamous nervous breakdown Isaac Newton had in the year 1693. The narrator has been trying to write a biography of Newton and tells Clio that he has now abandoned the book he had been working on for seven years!

*Writers block* In the letter we learn that the narrator is hoping to complete what he calls his “own *Principia*” at his Ferns retreat. He writes that he feels bored there and he can’t take all the noise from the farm animals and the tractors passing.

## LOVE AFFAIR

*Arrival at Ferns* The narrative describes his arrival at Ferns. The house is a long way from the nearest town. He is met by two mysterious women in the garden of the house. One, Otilie, is a “big blonde girl” and the other is her aunt Charlotte Lawless. They escort him to his lodge.

*Meeting with Otilie* He recounts to Clio his first meeting with Otilie, who had come to see him with a bowl of eggs, the day after he moved in. Otilie is 24 and an orphan. Her parents died in a car crash when she was 10.

*Edward and Michael* Edward arrives drunk and invites the narrator into the big house to have dinner with him and Charlotte and Otilie. The narrator realises that Edward is a “waster” and that he has simply been invited in to cover up for Edward’s drunkenness. At the dinner, the narrator also discovers that he has been mistaken once again about the boy Michael; it turns out he is not Charlotte’s child but Otilie’s.

*Love affair with Otilie* One day Otilie appears at the door to his lodge carrying her son Michael who is unconscious. He has fallen out of a tree. After a few moments, Michael revives. Later, Otilie comes

to his lodge again and the narrator kisses her. It is the beginning of their passionate affair, although he realises that Otilie is far more committed to their affair than he is. Otilie, on the other hand, is smitten.

*Slaps Otilie* One day when Edward and Charlotte have gone away to Dublin for the day, Otilie arrives at the lodge and invites the narrator up to the house. She wants him to see her room for the first time. They spend a passionate night together, but, it turns out they are in Charlotte and Edward's bed. The narrator is incensed and slaps Otilie across the face.

*Obsessed with Charlotte* On Michael's birthday, Edward and some of his family arrive. At the end of the night, the narrator is again in the arms of Otilie but he imagines he is embracing Charlotte instead. The narrator realises he is in love with Charlotte and even starts to imagine Charlotte and Otilie merged into a single person, a vision he calls Charlottilie.

*Nightmare* The narrator has a nightmare in which he imagines Edward and Otilie together and in it he imagines that Michael is their child. He wakes up in a panic thinking to himself: "Sixteen, for god's sake, she was only sixteen!"

*Selling the house* Charlotte and Edward argue about selling the house. That same night there is a thunderstorm. When it is finished, Otilie calls down to the narrator at the lodge and they continue their affair. The narrator tells Otilie that he will be leaving. He apologises for having slapped her across the face.

*Denial of parentage* When Otilie denies that Michael is her child, the narrator accuses her of lying. She breaks down in tears and the narrator feels guilt for how he has treated her.

*Edward dying* The next morning they discover Edward unconscious from drink in the hall. They send for the doctor and he tells them Edward is seriously ill. He will most likely not make it through the winter.

## CONCLUSION

*The narrator leaves* The narrator leaves the next morning. When he gets back to his flat, there are two letters waiting for him. One is an invitation for an interview for a job at Cambridge and the other is a letter offering the one-year position he currently has.

*Plans to Return* The narrator learns that Otilie is pregnant with his child and writes his own letter to Clio, in which he says he will go back to Ferns to look after Otilie's child and also Michael and most likely the house itself. He also believes that he will take up again the work for his book on Newton.

## THEMES

*The Petty and the Profound* One of the main themes of the novel is the constant battle between the petty and the profound. The unnamed historian is obsessed with finding out why Newton had his mental breakdown in 1693. He puts it down to Newton's sudden realisation that he did not have a way to describe, express and come to terms with the most commonplace of experiences. Despite the fact that he had spent his life making the most profound scientific discoveries, he comes to realise that it is all meaningless for most people. It is this gulf between the petty and the profound that appears to cause Newton such distress. He has lost faith in the absolutes that had guided his scientific research. The narrator also battles with the same kind of dilemma. He moves to Ferns to get away from the world so he can finish his book on Newton. However, the simple human interactions he experiences at Ferns gradually become his focus and he can no longer find any interest in the work he had once found so enthralling.

*Love* Love, or what might appear as love to the narrator, is an important theme of the novel. If anything, the narrator seems to become infatuated by the two women as soon as he sees them. The narrator appears to lose interest in Otilie a few days into their passionate affair only to then become obsessed by her aunt Charlotte. This should alert us to the fact that the narrator is not really

in love with either of them. In a sense, we are left wondering about the emotional development of the narrator throughout the novel. While, as a scholar, he is obsessed with Newton's concern over the impact women have had on his work, he also seems unable to balance his own life between wholesome loving relationship and the need to work hard as an academic.

**Appearances** The narrator is constantly making incorrect assumptions about the Grainger family. He assumes that Michael is Charlotte's child and that Edward is the father. It is only after a passionate affair with the niece, Otilie, that he comes to realise that Edward is most likely the father but that Otilie is the mother. He also assumes that the family are a perfect example of a well-off, refined Protestant family like many of the families who had occupied so many of the big houses in Ireland after independence. However, it turns out that they are Catholic and that they are so much in debt they will most likely have to sell their home. In a sense, he has also spent the best part of the last few years making assumptions about Newton based on two short letters Newton wrote to Locke in 1693. All of this makes us question whether we can believe anything he tells us. After all, we are also hearing about the whole story in letters he is writing to someone we know nothing about, namely Clio. The narrator is therefore a perfect example of an unreliable narrator, a very important device in postmodern fiction.

**Science and Real life** Another central theme that both Newton and the narrator discover in their lives is that it is impossible to disconnect completely from the world of everyday life. No matter how hard Newton tried to base all his calculations and scientific discoveries on absolutes, in the end, he came to realise that everyday life intervened in the world of science in fundamental ways. This made him realise that something like relativity also had a part to play. The narrator comes to realise that Newton most likely had his mental breakdown in 1693 because he had remained too strongly committed to his notion of absolutes. The narrator also realises something similar. No matter how hard he tries to focus on his book on Newton while at the lodge at Ferns, he cannot shut out his feelings and emotions for Otilie and Charlotte. In the end, his feelings for Otilie and Charlotte become so strong that he abandons his book altogether. Real life had intervened between him and his scholarly work and he comes to accept that this was for the best.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Newton** Along with Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton is probably the most famous scientist who ever lived. Even though Newton does not make an appearance in this novel, the narrator of the story is obsessed by the life of Newton and he even seems to be trying to imitate Newton in much of what he does.

**Burnt Out** Newton is obviously a gifted and dedicated scientist and mathematician. However, we learn from the narrator that the two letters he wrote to John Locke in 1693 reveal that he also had a deep emotional life. We learn that he struggled to sometimes balance his scientific and religious beliefs. His strong belief in absolutes for his discoveries in gravity, motion and optics was ultimately challenged when he realised he had no language for describing the world of everyday events and communications. Perhaps the fact that he turned to biblical interpretation and theological questions in his later life (as well as alchemy) suggests that he was not wholly willing to give up on his belief in absolutes.

**Sensitive** Newton is supposed to have suffered a mental breakdown in 1693 after he took more time to reflect on everyday experiences around him. This suggests Newton is a sensitive person. He takes the emotions that new experiences elicit in him very seriously. He becomes deeply troubled by how these new experiences make him feel. (It is unclear whether they are experiences with women or simply moments of self-discovery experienced having spent more time in society away from his scientific research). He then writes to his long-time friend John Locke about how these experiences make him feel and it is clear from the letter that he is deeply troubled and even unhinged. Even though he blames Locke for having led him astray, he is unwilling to give up on their friendship. Newton then comes across as a thoughtful and sensitive person.

**The Narrator** The narrator is someone who is committed to his work. He is an academic who has applied for a big academic job at the University of Cambridge. He is hopeful that once he finishes and publishes the book on Newton he will be offered an important job from the university. However, despite his best intentions, when he gets to Ferns and starts to observe the Graingers and live in the

company of Otilie and Charlotte, he becomes completely distracted. He can no longer concentrate on his work and, in the end, he gives up his book so that he can spend more time with them.

**Directionless** The narrator appears at times to suffer from a lack of direction. As he researches Newton's letters from 1693 the narrator asks himself if Newton was beginning to question the value of all his scientific work and publications. Was he looking for a new direction in life? The narrator then begins to question his own work on Newton too. He feels he has lost the motivation to work on the book.

**Wayward** A key moment is when he first arrives at the lodge at Ferns. He quickly becomes bored and irritated. He tries to continue working on his book but he tells Clio that the noises of the tractors and the farm animals around him prevent him from working. His reasons for giving up his work on his book suggest to us that he was really looking for a way out. He was secretly craving a new kind of experience that would rescue him from his dry, historical work on Newton. While he was eager to work out why Newton had his mental breakdown, it is clear that he does not have the motivation or willingness to put in the work required to finish a book on the life of Newton. Like Newton, he has perhaps got to a stage in his life where he needs new kinds of experiences so he can feel inspired to try something new.

**Passionate** The narrator is clearly driven by his passions. Not only does it only take a few days in the company of Otilie for him to give himself up completely to their affair, but it is also only a few weeks into the relationship with Otilie that he begins to have even stronger feelings for her aunt Charlotte. His feelings for the two women become so powerful that at one stage he imagines their two forms blended into one. On top of all this, his feelings also become so powerful that they blind him to how he might be hurting the people around him.

**Self-obsessed** The narrator might also be accused of being a little self-obsessed at times. Early in his relationship with Otilie, he begins to realise that his feelings for the young woman have changed. Instead of levelling with her and explaining how his feelings have for her have changed, he continues with his passionate affair. As the older person in the relationship, one might have expected him to be more aware of the feelings of the younger woman. It is only when Otilie plays a trick on him by seducing him in the bed of Charlotte and Edward (all the time making the narrator believe it is her bed) and the narrator responds by slapping her in the face, that he is truly made to confront these feelings. His violence towards Otilie also clearly demonstrates that his self-obsession and his lack of sympathy towards the feelings of others can lead him to lose control.

**Otilie** Otilie is a 24-year-old, single mother whose parents were both killed in a car crash when she was 10. The suggestion is (although never directly stated in the novel) that her son Michael is also the result of an affair conducted with her uncle-in-law, Edward. She comes across as a little lost and as someone who is desperate to fall in love. She is also quite independent as we learn later in the novel that she has left the family at Ferns to take up a job in Dublin.

**Traumatised** Otilie is clearly traumatised by her past. She lost both parents in a tragic car crash at the age of 10 and was then exploited by her new carers. Edward, the husband of her chief carer (her aunt Charlotte), impregnated her when she was only 16 and she went through with the pregnancy. Her son Michael wanders the grounds of the house and often seems isolated and uncared for.

**Desperate** Otilie is a character who is longing for love. She begins a relationship with the narrator – who is also an older man – almost immediately after he has moved into the lodge. After a few days she says to the narrator, "Jesus if this isn't love then what is?" However, we learn that it is about this time that the narrator's feelings for Otilie change. Otilie is either unaware of this change in his feelings or she is willing to continue their affair despite the fact that the narrator no longer shares her feelings. All this suggest that Otilie is desperate for love.

**Independent** Despite her difficult upbringing and despite the fact that men have taken advantage of her, Otilie is an independent person. Towards the end of the novel we learn that she has continued to communicate with the narrator after he has left Ferns. She has also moved away from the family at

Ferns and has taken up a job in Dublin. We also learn that the narrator will return to Ferns to be with her and the child.

**Charlotte** Charlotte is a middle-aged woman who runs the gardening business at Ferns House. She is the wife of Edward and she is the aunt of Otilie. She is described as the brains behind the gardening business by the narrator. She is also the person in the family who does all the accounts and manages the day-to-day expenses of the household. However, we learn that she is also a little traumatised. By the end of the novel the narrator learns that she has been put on Valium by the local doctor.

**Numbed** Charlotte has become somewhat numbed to what is happening around her. Having lived with the fact that her sister died in a car crash and with the scandal of her husband having impregnated her niece of 16, she is surprisingly calm and collected. However, one key moment comes towards the end of the novel when Edward is found unconscious from drink in the hall of their house. It seems it is a regular occurrence. However, on this occasion we learn that Edward is also very ill and most likely dying. The narrator approaches Charlotte on the stairs when the doctor leaves. He puts both hands on her shoulders and says in a yearning manner, "Oh Charlotte!" However, Charlotte is completely out of it on Valium and does not even notice what the narrator is doing.

**Edward** Edward is the aunt of Otilie and the husband of Charlotte. Edward is an alcoholic and he is very ill, most likely dying from something in the "gut". He is also the father of Michael, the son he has had with his niece-in-law, Otilie. He is clearly a haunted man who cannot escape his demons. He is also someone who relies on his wife, Charlotte, to manage the daily affairs of their gardening business.

**Irresponsible** Edward is clearly haunted by what he has done with Otilie. He is driven to drink and it seems that his weekly drinking sessions have made him very ill. They do not expect him to survive the winter even though he does in the end. Edward is clearly unable to rid himself of his demons. Having to live with the child – Michael – that he had with his wife's niece when she was 16 is clearly too much for him. He drinks to forget but it cannot remove the pain and guilt. A key moment is when he goes on a wild night of drinking after having had an argument about selling Ferns House with his wife Charlotte. Despite all the work Charlotte has done to keep the place going, Edward's behaviour still means they will have to sell up. Once again it is a moment of confrontation and conflict for Edward. Instead of dealing with it head-on, he takes to the bottle and disappears from the house for another binge drinking session. When he arrives back he is unconscious and he never appears sober again in the novel.