

# Love Letter

Subjects: Others

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A love letter is a romantic way to express feelings of love in written form. Whether delivered by hand, mail, carrier pigeon, or romantically left in a secret location, the letter may be anything from a short and simple message of love to a lengthy explanation of feelings. Love letters may 'move through the widest range of emotions – devotion, disappointment, grief and indignation, self-confidence, ambition, impatience, self-reproach and resignation'.

Keywords: love ; self-confidence ; devotion

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## 1. Historical Sketch

One of the first love letters in the world, mentioned more than 5000 years ago, is one carried from Rukmini to Krishna by her Brahmin messenger Sunanda. This letter appears in the Bhagavatha Purana, book 10, chapter 52.

Examples from Ancient Egypt range from the most formal – 'the royal widow . . . Ankhesenamun wrote a letter to the king of the Hittites, Egypt's old enemy, begging him to send one of his sons to Egypt to marry her' – to the down-to-earth: let me 'bathe in thy presence, that I may let thee see my beauty in my tunic of finest linen, when it is wet'.<sup>[1]</sup> Imperial China might demand a higher degree of literary skill: when a heroine, faced with an arranged marriage, wrote to her childhood sweetheart, he exclaimed, 'what choice talent speaks in her well-chosen words . . . everything breathes the style of a Li T'ai Po. How on earth can anyone want to marry her off to some humdrum clod?'<sup>[2]</sup>

In Ovid's Rome, 'the tricky construction and reception of the love letter' formed the centre of his *Ars Amatoria* or Art of Love: 'the love letter is situated at the core of Ovidian erotics'.<sup>[3]</sup> The Middle Ages saw the formal development of the *Ars dictaminis*, including the art of the love letter, from opening to close. For salutations, 'the scale in love letters is nicely graded from "To the noble and discreet lady P., adorned with every elegance, greeting" to the lyrical fervours of "Half of my soul and light of my eyes . . . greeting, and that delight which is beyond all word and deed to express"'.<sup>[4]</sup> The substance similarly 'ranges from doubtful equivocal to exquisite and fantastic dreaming', rising to appeals for 'the assurance "that you care for me the way I care for you"'.<sup>[5]</sup>

The love letter continued to be taught as a skill at the start of the eighteenth century, as in Richard Steele's *Spectator*.<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps in reaction, the artificiality of the concept came to be distrusted by the Romantics: "'A love-letter? My letter – a love-letter? It . . . came straight from my heart"'.<sup>[7]</sup>

## 2. The Modern Love Letter

The love letter continued to flourish in the first half of the twentieth-century – F Scott Fitzgerald gives us a Flapper 'absorbed in composing one of those non-committal, marvellously elusive letters that only a young girl can write'<sup>[8]</sup> – and may even have been encouraged by the then-prevalence of global war. Before the wide use of telecommunications, letters were one of the few ways for a couple to remain in contact, particularly in wartime: when one of them was posted or stationed some distance from the other, the "being apart" often intensified emotions. Sometimes a desired normal communication could lead to a letter expressing love, longing and desires: 'the very act of writing often triggers love feelings in the writer'.<sup>[9]</sup> During these times, "love letters" were the only means of communication, and soldiers even swapped addresses of desirable young ladies so that an initial communication and possible start of a relationship could be initiated. On the downside, when a correspondence was delayed, 'our move, the secrecy, the battle...it could be explained, but no explanation soothed my worry'; yet when letters came, operational contingencies might mean the need to 'Fold the letter carefully away...Fold that whole world away, and passion and love, so that they couldn't be hurt; yet of course they were there...when I saw a man, any man, reading a letter'.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the second half of the century, with the coming of the permissive society - 'imprisoning in physical bonding'<sup>[11]</sup> - and the instantaneity of the Information Age, the more distanced and nuanced art of the love letter might be said to have fallen somewhat into disrepute: 'what could be more tradition-bound than a woman's (heterosexual) love letter?'.<sup>[12]</sup> A couple

might instead separate with the exchange, "'You should have said - I'll write.'" "But we won't." "No, but let's preserve the forms, the *forms* at least...".<sup>[13]</sup>

Even in the electronic age, however, the humble love letter may possibly still play its part in life, if in new formats (exemplified perhaps in *You've Got Mail*); and 'on the internet, one can find numerous sites where people obtain advice on how to write a love letter'.<sup>[14]</sup> Sometimes letters are preferable to face-to-face contact because they can be written as the thoughts come to the author's mind. This may allow feelings to be more easily expressed than if the writer were in the beloved's presence. Further, expressing strong emotional feelings to paper or some other permanent form can be an expression within itself of desire and the importance of the beloved and the lover's emotions. Perhaps any 'correspondence is a kind of love affair...tinged by a subtle but palpable eroticism';<sup>[15]</sup> while by contrast, in mobile, Twitter or Tweet, 'telegraphese was infectious', and the sign-off "'LOL! B cool B N touch bye"...felt like having a disinterested young mother'.<sup>[16]</sup>

The expression of feelings may be made to an existing love or in the hope of establishing a new relationship; and the increasing rarity and consequent emotional charm of personal mail may also serve to emphasize the emotional importance of the message.

## 2.1. Possession

In A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, the (twentieth century) plot turns on the discovery of love letters between two (nineteenth century) literary figures: 'as though you'd found — Jane Austen's love letters'.<sup>[17]</sup> In his last letter, returning the correspondence, the man says 'You should burn them, I think, and yet, if Abelard had destroyed Eloisa's marvellous words, if the Portuguese Nun had kept silent, how much the poorer would we not be, how much less wise?'.<sup>[18]</sup>

The book also explored how love letters subsequently 'exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for a reader';<sup>[19]</sup> as well as the 'typically unrecognised quality of...the keeping of distance'<sup>[20]</sup> in the face of the cult of 'letting it all hang out...we question everything except the centrality of sexuality'<sup>[21]</sup> — a theme epitomised perhaps in the fate of the letters themselves.

## 2.2. Encore: "A Love Letter"

Lacan consistently linked desire and the letter: 'The function of desire is a last residuum of the effect of the signifier in the subject'.<sup>[22]</sup> Indeed, he called a late seminar "A Love Letter", emphasising therein that 'speaking of love is in itself a *jouissance*'.<sup>[23]</sup> It was perhaps with respect to the love letter that he conceded that 'in the life of a man, a woman is something he believes in...believes her effectively to be saying something. That's when things get stopped up — to believe *in*, one believes *her*. It's what's called love'.<sup>[24]</sup> (He added) 'Believing a woman is, thank God, a widespread state — which makes for company, one is no longer all alone'.<sup>[25]</sup>

# 3. Style and Setting

As with any letter, a love letter could be written in any structure or style. One historically popular method is as a sonnet or other form of poem. William Shakespeare's sonnets are often cited as good examples of how to write emotional themes. Structure and suggestions of love letters have formed the subject of many published books, such as the anthology *Love Letters of Great Men*. 'After reading hundreds of love letters for her collection *The Book of Love* Cathy N. Davidson confesses, "The more titles I read, the less I was able to generalize about female versus male ways of loving or expressing that love".<sup>[26]</sup>

After the end of a relationship, returning love letters to the sender or burning them can symbolize the pain felt. In the past, love letters also needed to be returned as a matter of honor: a love letter, particularly from a lady, could be compromising or embarrassing later in life, and the use of 'compromising letters...for blackmailing or other purposes'<sup>[27]</sup> was a Victorian cliché.

Some stationery companies produce paper and envelopes specifically for love letters. Some of these are scented — 'ground up lavender...a whole new sensory experience in letter reading'<sup>[28]</sup> — though most people prefer to spray them with their own perfume. This emphasizes, in the receiver's mind, the physical connection that occurred between them in this form of communication and thus may strengthen the overall impact of the letter.

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