

Love Letters: An Analysis

In the following paper, I will explain how the form of love letters, their textual shape and contents, helps them to achieve their social purpose as a means of sharing vulnerability. I will deconstruct three letters, written by three different authors, and specify to the reader what traits they have that make them a love letter, and how those same traits act as a way to accomplish the letters' intentions. The aim of this analysis is to show the variety with which love might be communicated, but at the same time, the consistency of love as a collective emotion.

To begin, we must first ask: What is a love letter?

A love letter is a form of poetry. It is a declaration of intent, a deliverer of adoration, and most uniquely, it is the immortalization of the most decent of emotions. Love letters are meaningful and diverse. They can be delivered via the post, by hand, or, in the modern age, electronically. They take on many shapes and forms. They might be silly or sweet or severe. They might be romantic or they might be practical. They might be rambling verses of prose, or they might just be a flash on a screen. However, they are not completely without uniformity, and amidst their chaos, they do contain a set of rules and guidelines, though they are a limited bunch.

For one: A love letter must be written. It must appear on a page, and it must involve words or symbols. For instance, a love letter cannot be just the song, sung aloud, but it can be the written lyrics. A love letter's written trait identifies its being a letter and not something else entirely. This first rule seems to be outwardly obvious, but its importance is one which cannot be overstated. Writing one's feelings down in words, rather than speaking them aloud, gives the writer the advantage of time. It allows the writer the ability to revise their ideas and voice their feelings without the fear of fumbling in the moment. Corresponding to the benefit of revision, written words convey a sense of deliberateness. They give their readers the feeling that there is a thoughtful purpose to their patterns, and confidently appear as more than a rushed brandishing of 'word vomit'. They are deliberated upon and handpicked, making them special. Furthermore, written composition gives thoughts permanence. Writing makes ideas tangible, which consequently makes them infinite. A good portion of a love letter's power is held in its potential

to be treasured physically. It may be read over and over again, providing its reader with the ability to hold on to the feelings it evokes, eternally. Lastly, a written letter is distributable. It is able to be literally delivered from author to reader, giving it a portability that aids in its employment. This first rule of love letters, that they must take on a written form, makes them timeless, boundless, and never-ending.

The second rule of a love letter is: It must be addressed to someone or something. The receiver may be a person—anyone from spouse to stranger—but it might also be a place, a time, or an object. Love is unfussy in that way. This rule that requires a recipient to make a love letter possesses a duplicity which makes it simultaneously personal and shared. A receiver implies a giver, and thus, this giver must be the one to record their tenderness. With tenderness comes a feeling of intimacy, something many wish to be secret or at least exclusive. However, in directing this familiarity to another, though not necessarily offering it, there is a level of exposure that makes it no longer private. This contrasting phenomenon creates a vulnerability in a love letter which is a driving force in its success. Moreover, the subject of a love letter, regardless of who or what it is, is wholly necessary. Without a specific addressee, there is no material of which to write. A recipient provides content. For example, a love letter might be written to something completely obscure—like the warm slant of light through a window—and because of its elusiveness, it might seem too abstract, like it couldn't possibly be a love letter, yet as long as it addresses something, it is. An author having an object of desire is vital to the objective of a love letter, which is to convey devotion.

The third rule, more focused on content, is: That a love letter must hold a level of vulnerability. A love letter might do this in one of many different ways. It might lyrically describe the subject. It might contain proclamations. It might declare love obviously, or it might show it tacitly. It may show feeling in any way that it wishes to, whether it be through jealous jabs, pained pronouncements, or adoring affirmations. For some, a hypothetical love letter appears as a positive and grand thing. Many believe it will contain the phrases “I love you” or “I miss you” but this is not always the case. It is not uncommon that a love letter might speak of hatred and pain, however, it remains a love letter if there is still a level of admiring vulnerability within it.

We now understand that the key elements of a love letter—written words, a specific subject, and an expression of vulnerability—are what give it both form and power. In the following analysis of three distinct letters, I will highlight their differences while also showing how, despite these differences, they all remain love letters at their core.

The first letter I will analyze is often referred to as “The Desperate Adulteress” and can be found in *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*. In it, Sackville-West writes a simple, yet profoundly reverential letter to Woolf, describing the impact she has on her. She praises Woolf’s literary skill, expresses her admiration, and confesses her deep longing. In the opening lines, she declares, “I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia” (Sackville-West, 12), immediately establishing the rawness of her feelings. The beauty of her letter lies in this unadorned sincerity—there are no ambiguities or hidden meanings. The reader need not decipher her emotions; her devotion is clear. She writes, “It is incredible how essential to me you have become” (Sackville-West, 12), and this clear delivery of helpless worship makes her affection all the more touching. Her vulnerability is further emphasized when she closes by saying, “Please forgive me for writing such a miserable letter” (Sackville-West, 12). This plea for forgiveness shows that Woolf’s opinion matters deeply to her. The straightforward language and candid expressions of love make this letter an open declaration, showing that love can be both profound and uncomplicated. Through its adoration of Woolf’s literary genius and Sackville-West’s emotional transparency, the letter touches, timeless in its directness and earnestness.

The second letter, Pablo Neruda’s “Sonnet XVII”, addressed to his third wife Matilde Urrutia, is a love letter, even though it is not specifically entitled as one. Though Neruda is widely appreciated for his romantic poetry, this sonnet of his stands out as one of his most celebrated works. It captures a love that is quiet, ineffable, and deeply rooted in the very structure of being. The language Neruda uses is vivid and haunting, conjuring images of a connection that is deeply personal. When he writes, “I love you because I know no other way than this: where I does not exist, nor you” (Neruda, 19), he speaks of a love that feels more like an instinctive, inseparable union than a conscious choice—an attraction beyond control. This type of love is not like the vocal admiration of Sackville-West, who praises Woolf’s intellect and skill. Instead, Neruda’s love is instinctual, almost mystical, and centered on the merging of identities. Though his sonnet differs from Sackville-West’s earnest expression of admiration, it

carries its own power and depth, capturing a love that is both unspoken and extensive. In its quiet intensity, Neruda's letter reveals that love can be overridingly powerful, no matter the form it takes.

The third letter is from a current novel, *The Wicked King*. Written by Holly Black, Cardan, her male protagonist, writes a series of letters to Jude, Black's female protagonist, pleading for her swift return after her temporary banishment from his world. Letter after letter, he writes to her with no response, where he confesses his feelings and begs forgiveness. However, in his final letter, having still received no answers, he writes only her name, "JUDE JUDE JUDE" repeated over and over, before ending with a simple and desperate "please, Jude" (Black, 54). This minimalistic letter speaks volumes through its repetition, conveying Cardan's deep anguish and longing. The repetition of Jude's name focuses attention on his desperation, while the final line—"please, Jude"—delivers a compelling emotional jab. The lowercase "please" conveys his vulnerability, making the letter feel raw and unguarded, a true declaration of love. While Cardan's letter contrasts with the more elaborate expressions of affection in Sackville-West's and Neruda's letters, its strength lies in what is absent. It demonstrates that a love letter doesn't need grandiosity to be potent. As long as it conveys vulnerability and devotion, it can be as triumphant in its purpose as any other.

These three love letters, though vastly different in form and content, are all love letters nonetheless. Their labeling as love letters is not defined by magnificent promises or declarations, which is clear from the moving honesty of Sackville-West's reverence for Woolf, nor is it about being explicitly labeled as such, clear through the beauty of Neruda's quiet sonnet. It is not even about endlessly expressing feelings or infatuation, as shown in Cardan's simple and desperate plea in *The Wicked King*. No, the essence of these letters lies in something deeper: intention. It's about the act of sharing one's emotions and exposing one's heart—whether those feelings are great or simple, whether the expression is intricate or raw. The power of a love letter is not in its creative flair but in its willingness to be vulnerable. At its core, an expression of written love, sent or not, is defined by its purpose: to convey love and openness to another, no matter how straightforward or complex the emotions may be.

This need, to convey feelings of love, is something most people experience at some point or another in their lives. People meet people, they get to know one another, and they fall in love.

They are altered by others—by their habits and interests and ways of being in the world—and often they feel the need to express their happiness for these changes. This is the reason love letters are so successful in their goal of expressing a person's care. They are capsules of moments and feeling. They let their reader know the writer's feelings and thoughts and allow their writer the space to express them. They permit grace and time, making them truthful, real, and perfect. Perfect, not in syntax, but in sentiment. Love letters are the progeny of time and inspiration. They are timeless and powerful, evolving with each new letter written. Ultimately, the enduring value of a love letter lies not in its artfulness or its structure, but in the courage it takes to put one's feelings on paper. In this way, they continue to serve as the perfect vehicles for human connection, ensuring that, as long as love exists, love letters will persist.

Works Cited

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