

# Seneca on Love

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*omnia vincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori*  
Vergil<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Within Seneca's prose, one detects a deep understanding of the true feeling and significance of love in its different aspects —love for one's family, for one's friends, for one's spouse, for one's fellow men, for one's country. Seneca's ability to depict this human passion so vividly stems from his own good fortune to have experienced this emotion to the fullest in his own life. His philosophical writings are replete with moving descriptions of the many varieties of love that so strongly touched his own heart. True love, Seneca maintains, is, in many ways, analogous to an ideal friendship: both arise from mutual, genuine affection. In both cases, Seneca offers a simple philtre for their acquisition and their retention: *si vis amari, ama*. No one is deserving of love who is incapable of bestowing it upon others. Love is an undiluted emotion conferred with magnanimity; it does not look to personal convenience; it remains steadfast and is not altered by the vicissitudes of time and fortune. Such unselfish love gives *gaudium* to one's soul. Our Cordoban Philosopher embraced a humanitarianism, a cosmopolitanism, and a love that included all human beings —men and women, rich and poor, masters and slaves.

**Keywords:** Love. Friendship. Humanitarianism.

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## Séneca sobre el amor

## RESUMEN

En la prosa de Séneca queda al descubierto un profundo conocimiento del verdadero sentimiento y significado del amor en distintos aspectos —amor a la familia, a los amigos, a la esposa, a los compañeros, a la patria. La capacidad de Séneca para describir tan vivamente esta pasión humana procede de la suerte que tuvo de haber experimentado esta emoción hasta el grado más alto en su propia vida. Sus escritos filosóficos están llenos de conmovedoras descripciones de muy diversas formas de amor que alcanzaron su corazón. El verdadero amor —asegura Séneca— es semejante en buena medida a una amistad ideal: surgen de un auténtico afecto mutuo. En ambos casos Séneca ofrece una receta sencilla para su adquisición y conservación: *si vis amari, ama*. Nadie es acreedor de amor, si no es capaz de otorgarlo a

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<sup>1</sup> *Eclogue* 10.69.

otros. El amor es un sentimiento puro que se da con magnanimidad; no mira al interés personal; permanece firme y no cambia por los azares del tiempo o de la fortuna. Tal amor desinteresado llena el alma de *gaudium*. Nuestro filósofo cordobés adopta un humanitarismo, un cosmopolitismo y un amor que abarca a todos los seres humanos: hombres y mujeres, ricos y pobres, señores y esclavos.

**Palabras clave:** Amor. Amistad. Humanitarismo.

MOTTO, A.L., «Séneca sobre el amor», *Cuad. fil. clás. Estud. lat.*, 27, 1 (2007) 79-86.

Within the prose writings of the Philosopher Seneca, one detects a deep understanding of the true feeling and significance of love in its different aspects—love for one’s family, for one’s friends, for one’s spouse, for one’s fellow men, for one’s country. Seneca’s ability to depict this human passion so vividly stems from his own good fortune to have experienced this emotion to the fullest extent in his own life. The pages of his philosophy are replete with moving descriptions of the many varieties of love that so strongly touched his own heart.

Seneca learned much about love, kindness, and generosity from members of his own family. He describes his mother Helvia, to whom he pays highest tribute in the *Ad Helviam*, as a woman with a deep philosophic bent, a love for the liberal arts<sup>2</sup> and a genuine devotion to her children. So great was her unselfishness and love that he writes:

*Tu liberorum tuorum bonis plurimum gavisa es, minimum usa; tu liberalitati nostrae semper imposuisti modum, cum tuae non imponeres ... Numquam indulgentia ad utilitatem respexit...*<sup>3</sup>

You rejoiced very much in your children’s blessings, having used them not at all; you always set a limit to our generosity [toward you], although you set no limit to your generosity [toward us] ... Your kindness never stemmed from self-interest...

Seneca’s respect and admiration was extended to his father as well. Though he portrays him as strict and old fashioned, he speaks fondly of him, describing him as *virorum optimus, pater meus*<sup>4</sup>. It was from him, a distinguished rhetor, that the younger Seneca acquired his skill in eloquence and discourse. Seneca honored his father by writing a biography of him that has, unfortunately, not come down to us. Moreover, Seneca the Elder’s kindness to his son induced our Philosopher to abandon a vegetarian

<sup>2</sup> *Ad Helv.*, 17,4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ad Helv.*, 14,3. Hereafter, quotations from Seneca’s writings will include the source in parentheses within the body of this paper. All translations are my own.

<sup>4</sup> *Ad Helv.*, 17,4.

diet and «to dine better» (*melius cenare*)<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, love for his aged father restrained Seneca, when ill, from committing suicide:

*Saepe impetum cepi abrum-  
pendae vitae; patris me in-  
dulgentissimi senectus re-  
tinuit. Cogitavi enim non  
quam fortiter ego mori possem,  
sed quam ille fortiter de-  
siderare non posset. Itaque  
imperavi mihi, ut viverem.*  
(*Epist.*, 78,2)

I often felt impelled to put  
an end to my life; the thought  
of my kind old father restrained  
me. For I thought, not how  
bravely I was able to die, but  
how he was unable bravely to  
endure the loss. And so I com-  
manded myself to live.

Not only did Seneca's parents set an example for him of unselfish love, but so did his maternal aunt. Similar in nature to his mother Helvia, this affectionate aunt, regarded by her nephew as a woman of wisdom, nurtured him through illness, devoting herself energetically to helping him get well. With warmth and gratitude, he writes:

*Illius manibus in urbem per-  
latus sum, illius pio mater-  
noque nutricio per longum tempus  
aeger convalui...*  
(*Ad Helv.*, 19,2)

In her arms I was brought to  
Rome; because of her pious and  
maternal care, I convalesced  
after a lengthy illness.

To this same aunt, Seneca owed his initial success in politics. Although by nature modest, quiet, and reserved, through love for him she overcame her shyness, becoming ambitious for his sake. It was thus through her influence, as wife of the governor of Egypt, that Seneca embarked upon the quaestorship, the first step in his *cursus honorum*<sup>6</sup>.

Another woman who played a very dominant role in his life and whom he loved most dearly was his wife, Pompeia Paulina. He touchingly relates how concerned she always was for his health and how responsive he was to her demands that he take good care of himself. For he is well aware that her very life depends upon his<sup>7</sup>. He goes so far as to say that even if there are pressing reasons to end one's life, one should continue to live for the sake of one's loved ones.

<sup>5</sup> *Epist.*, 108,22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ad Helv.*, 19,2.

<sup>7</sup> *Epist.*, 104,2.

...bono viro vivendum sit  
 non quamdiu iuvat sed quamdiu  
 oportet. Ille, qui non uxorem,  
 non amicum tanti putat, ut  
 diutius in vita commoretur,  
 qui perseverabit mori, delicatus  
 est ... Ingentis animi  
 est aliena causa ad vitam re-  
 verti ... quid enim iucun-  
 dius, quam uxori tam carum esse,  
 ut propter hoc tibi carior fias?  
 (Epist., 104,3-5)

...the good man should live not  
 as long as it pleases him but  
 as long as he ought. That  
 man who does not consider his  
 wife or his friend important  
 enough for him to linger longer  
 in life, who insists upon  
 dying, is a weakling ... it  
 is a mark of the great soul to  
 return to life for the sake of  
 another ... for what is  
 more pleasant than to be so  
 dear to your wife that because  
 of this you become dearer to  
 yourself?

True love is, in many ways, analogous to an ideal friendship: both arise from mutual, genuine affection; neither is propelled by any ulterior motive stemming from greed, profit, ambition, renown<sup>8</sup>. Those who seek love or friendship for personal aggrandizement strip these ennobling human relationships of their virtue, reducing them to the level of sordid and prostituted emotions —of the kind often embraced by the *profanum vulgus*<sup>9</sup>.

Although love and friendship have so much in common, yet the feeling of love is even more intense than that of friendship; it can be described as friendship carried to an extreme<sup>10</sup>. In both cases, however, in love and in friendship, Seneca offers a simple philtre for their acquisition and their retention. He quotes from the philosopher Hecato who says:

Ego tibi monstrabo amato-  
 rium sine medicamento, sine  
 herba, sine ullius veneficae  
 carmine: si vis amari, ama.  
 (Epist., 9,6)<sup>11</sup>

I shall show you a love  
 potion without a drug, without  
 a herb; without the incantation  
 of any sorceress: if you want  
 to be loved, love.

No one is deserving of love who is incapable of bestowing it upon others. It is for this reason that a cruel tyrant is detested. As Seneca so aptly remarks: *nec quisquam amat, quos timet*. («No one loves those whom he fears»)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Epist., 9,11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Epist., 9,12. See Motto - Clark 1993, pp. 35-39.

<sup>10</sup> Epist., 9,11; 35,1.

<sup>11</sup> Epist., 9,6; see Hecato, *Frag.*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> *De Benef.*, 4,19,1; cf. *De Clem.*, 1,19,6.

Love for one's country, for one's family and friends, for one's husband or wife, can in no way be mingled with fear: *non potest amor cum timore misceri*<sup>13</sup>; it challenges dangers and seeks to overcome them<sup>14</sup>. Such love is pure and unalloyed; it is an undiluted emotion bestowed with magnanimity; it does not look to personal convenience<sup>15</sup>; it remains steadfast and is not altered by the vicissitudes of time and Fortune<sup>16</sup>. In Shakespeare's words, love does not «bend» or «alter,» but is «the marriage of true minds»:

...it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken,  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom<sup>17</sup>.

Such unselfish love gives *gaudium* to one's soul whether the loved one is absent or present:

*Venit ad nos ex iis, quos  
amamus, etiam absentibus  
gaudium ...; conspectus et  
praesentia et conversatio  
habet aliquid vivae voluptatis...*

(*Epist.*, 35,3)

Joy comes to us from those whom we love even when they are absent ...; when present, seeing them and associating intimately with them yields real pleasure...

Such deep emotion elevates the spirit and ennobles the soul. The common objection made against the Stoics, that they rejected or suppressed the emotions in favor of apathy<sup>18</sup>, certainly does not apply to Seneca. He and the later Stoics stressed the regulation of emotions rather than their denial.

Thus, regarding love, Seneca maintains that this emotion is honorable, that it should be indulged, and that it should be shared as often as possible with those deserving of it:

*...amicis avide fruamur, quia  
quamdiu contingere hoc possit,  
incertum est.*

(*Epist.*, 63,8)

... let us enjoy our friends avidly, for how long this blessing will fall to our lot is uncertain.

<sup>13</sup> *Epist.*, 47,18.

<sup>14</sup> *Epist.*, 76,20.

<sup>15</sup> *Epist.*, 9,10.

<sup>16</sup> *Epist.*, 9,12.

<sup>17</sup> Sonnet 116, lines 5-12.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Will Durant characterizes Stoicism as advocating «philosophic indifference» and an «apathetic acceptance of defeat» (1928, pp. 109, 108).

But even when gone, their love, their memory, will still linger with us, offering us soothing and pleasant recollections<sup>19</sup>.

*Mihi crede, magna pars ex iis,  
quos amavimus, licet ipsos  
casus abstulerit, apud nos  
manet.*

(*Epist.*, 99,4)

Believe me, a great part of those whom we have loved, although chance has taken them away from us, remains with us.

For, as Seneca asserts, in his laconic, pointed style:

*Habui ... illos tamquam amis-  
surus, amisi tamquam habeam.*

(*Epist.*, 63,7)

I ... had them as if I were going to lose them, I lost them as if I have them [still].

The beloved might be taken away, but the past is unassailable by Fortune; hence one's fond remembrances are a permanent and a meaningful possession<sup>20</sup>. This is the essence of Seneca's argument in all of his *consolationes*. Since love is such a vital part of our existence and since Fortune is so fickle, one should extend one's love to as many human beings as possible. Such expansion is, paradoxically, more restrained and evenly distributed than that love which confines itself within narrow bounds. This latter type of love, Seneca remarks, is ego-centric, monomaniacal, and even somewhat selfish.

*...ne unum quidem nimis amavit,  
qui plus quam unum amare non  
potuit.*

(*Epist.*, 63,11)

... he who has not been able to love more than one, did not even love that one too much.

At any rate, Seneca speaks of a man of that sort as *stultissimus*.

The sensible man, on the other hand, is well aware of the need to expand his love; he knows that such expansion will multiply his joy and will lessen his pain along life's journey. Just as he realizes the necessity of having more than one garment to protect him from the cold so that if that garment is lost or stolen, he readily has another at hand, so he knows that his love should extend to more than one person in order to defend himself against the unpredictable blows of Fortune<sup>21</sup>.

Moreover, included among a wise man's love are the great philosophers, thinkers, and statesmen of all eras. They become his guides, his exemplary models with whom he can daily converse. They too will gladden his heart and give him strength<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> *Epist.*, 63,7.

<sup>20</sup> See Motto - Clark (1987, pp. 31-41).

<sup>21</sup> *Epist.*, 63,11.

<sup>22</sup> See Motto - Clark (1994, pp. 157-165).

Seneca did indeed follow the advice he gave others regarding love. His own love extended itself to his family, to his friends, to his wife, to the great minds of the ages. He embraced a humanitarianism, a cosmopolitanism, and a love of his fellow men that included all human beings —men and women, rich and poor, masters and slaves<sup>23</sup>. Quoting the famous line from Terence, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* («I am a man, I think nothing pertaining to man alien to me»)<sup>24</sup>, Seneca stresses that man is born for social union which is engendered by love and kindness. In fact, he offers a golden rule for human conduct:

...omne hoc, quod vides, quo  
divina atque humana conclusa  
sunt, unum est; membra sumus  
corporis magni. Natura nos  
cognatos edidit ... Haec nobis  
amorem indidit mutuum et so-  
ciabiles fecit ... Habeamus  
in commune; nati sumus. So-  
cietas nostra lapidum fornicationi  
simillima est, quae casura, nisi  
in vicem obstarent...

(*Epist.*, 95,52-53)

...everything you see, which en-  
compasses divine and human affairs,  
is one; we are members of one large  
body. Nature bore us related to  
one another ... She instilled in  
us a mutual love and made us com-  
patible ... Let us hold every-  
thing in common; we stem from  
a common source. Our fellowship  
is very similar to an arch of stones,  
which would fall apart, if they did  
not reciprocally support each other...

Seneca repeatedly reminds us that no one can live entirely for himself: *Alteri vivas oportet, si vis tibi vivere* («You must live for another, if you wish to live for yourself»)<sup>25</sup>. That Seneca lived for others is evident in the many literary works he addressed to family members and to friends for whom he had the deepest affection —*e.g.*, the *Epistulae Morales* to Lucilius, the *De Tranquillitate Animi* to Serenus, the *De Beneficiis* to Aebutius Liberalis, the *De Ira* to Novatus, the *De Vita Beata* to Gallio, the *De Brevitate Vitae* to Paulinus, and *Consolationes* to Helvia and to Marcia.

Moreover, the mutual love that existed between Seneca and his wife Paulina is most noteworthy. So deep was this bond of love between them that when Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide, Paulina insisted upon accompanying him and ending her life as well. Seneca tried at first to dissuade her, but then relented<sup>26</sup>. The following observation regarding love, attributed to John Steinbeck, is indeed applicable here:

I believe that love cannot  
be bought except with love,  
and he who has a good wife  
wears heaven in his hat<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Consult Motto (1955, p. 336).

<sup>24</sup> *Heaut.*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> *Epist.*, 48,2.

<sup>26</sup> *TAC.*, *Ann.*, 15,61.

<sup>27</sup> Roney (2000, p. 153).

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