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# Letters Within Jane Austen's Novels: A Bridge Towards Romantic Communication

BY MARY BUTLER

Mary is a Senior at Bridgewater State College and will be graduating with a degree in English, and a minor in Secondary Education. She wrote this piece with the guidance of her mentor, Dr. Michael Boyd, as a part of Honors Thesis on Jane Austen. She plans on continuing onto a Masters program and developing a lifelong relationship with Austen's works.

Jane Austen often incorporates letters within her novels as a method of discreet communication between characters that are prevented from interacting openly with each other because of social convention. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Sense and Sensibility* all contain examples of this type of communication in which the character who writes the letter wishes to convey some sort of explanation or emotion that breaks, mends, or rekindles the relationship the writer had with the letter's recipient. Although letters are dispersed throughout her novels, the letters within these three novels play a crucial role in the development of Austen's characters and the advancement of the plot. Through close analysis of the letters, the characters of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice*, Captain Wentworth and Marianne of *Persuasion*, and Marianne and Willoughby of *Sense and Sensibility* are more clearly conveyed that through other literary means such as dialogue or descriptive narration. They provide necessary insight that brings greater understanding to who the characters are, and why each relationship culminates the way it does at the end of the novel.

Certain rules and customs accompanied the tradition of letter writing, especially concerning women. Penelope Joan Fritzer quotes *The Lady's Preceptor*, a common guidebook of propriety in Austen's era, "never...to write to anyone but of your own sex, nor to any but of such Quality and Reputation as that your Correspondence with them may bring no Reflexion on yourself..."(Fritzer 72). Writing to the opposite sex would spark rumors and speculation that the writer and recipient are romantically involved. Fritzer argues that the letters are also used as a way to evaluate the character of the letter writer. The difficulty with letter writing was that letters were not a private exchange of ideas and sentiments as they are today. Instead, the information they carried was frequently shared with the recipient's family and friends. Austen's choosing to bypass this

social custom makes these covert letters so distinctive and influential in her novels.

Austen displays some approval of the rules that *The Lady's Preceptor* sets forth, namely that letters should not contain anything that may cause shame to the writer later on. The characters that do send letters with imprudent content are caused a significant amount of hurt and embarrassment later on in the novel. Marianne is pitied and whispered about, and Emma ridicules Robert Martin for proposing to Harriet so publicly. Conversely, characters that endeavored to keep their romantic letters private avoided scandal, rumors, and heartache. Public or private, every romantically themed letter that Austen chooses to incorporate into her novels advances the characterization of the writers as well as complicates the plot.

The moment in which Mr. Darcy hands Elizabeth his letter of explanation marks the pivotal turn of events that drastically changes her opinion of him. In order to appreciate the sincerity of the letter, Austen includes a discussion earlier in the novel that illustrates Darcy's method of writing letters. Caroline Bingley compliments his writing, stating that he easily writes such "charmingly long letters" (*Pride and Prejudice* 53), but her brother Bingley contradicts her and claims that Darcy "does not write with ease" (35) and that he searches for the most precise words to incorporate into his letters. Darcy also argues with Caroline, stating that although his letters may be lengthy, he cannot profess them to be charming. Whether he considers himself to be at ease with his writing is not certain until the text of his letter to Elizabeth is presented. The language Darcy employs in that letter demonstrates how uneasy he is in writing to her. He is continually apologizing for what he feels is necessary for him to explain.

As with his proposal of marriage, Darcy's letter dwells on matters of pride and honor as much as the matters of his heart. There are subtle references to his unrequited feelings, but they are smoothed over with chivalrous bravado

and apology. He states that his love for her cannot be forgotten soon enough, and yet repeatedly mentions how strongly he feels for her. The letter demonstrates that although he has given up hope of winning Elizabeth over, his regard for her is just as strong as ever. He compliments her repeatedly, affirming his belief that she possesses enough sense and duty to give credit to his letter and keep its contents a secret. He also describes his feelings for her as "the utmost force of passion" that pushed him to put aside the objections that he held for Bingley to be connected to her family.

Before relating something that could possibly upset Elizabeth, Darcy prefaces the account with an apology. In the beginning of the letter, he says, "if, in the explanation of them which is due to myself, I am under the necessity of relating feelings which may be offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry" (151). Several apologies later, he equates offending her with having pain inflicted upon himself, displaying how deep his concern is her feelings. Lastly, he concludes his letter by adding, "God bless you" (156), displaying yet again his enduring affection for Elizabeth and concern for her welfare.

After understanding how important the writing of the letter is to Darcy, it is also necessary to acknowledge the importance of Elizabeth's reading it. Elizabeth prides herself on her ability to read people and the letter forces her to reconsider Darcy's character without the influence of preconceptions she has made of him. Each time she examines its contents, her opinion of both Wickham and Darcy is altered. The first few readings are done with the purpose of finding fault in either Darcy's expression or reasons, but with each passing reading she is inclined to do his arguments more justice.

Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy is not immediately negated by his explanation. This is partially because of her fluctuating emotions over such an intimate gesture by Darcy and also because "she read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of

knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes" (156). This is a continuous problem with her: she assumes what Darcy will say or do before he even takes action. She immediately discredits his opinion of Jane's feelings without considering his perspective as an outsider to the family, rather than an intimate confidante of Jane's. Darcy's honesty about his opinion of her family and connections provokes Elizabeth to be "too angry to have any wish of doing him justice" (156). It is with these thoughts that she moves on the second half of the letter, which details the past Wickham and Darcy have shared. Elizabeth cannot believe that Wickham could be capable of such despicable deceit and manipulation.

She is so agitated by the letter that she immediately puts it away, never wanting to look at it again. There are several reasons for her reaction. The initial shock of such a scandal is enough to disconcert her, but coupled with the blow the explanation does to her ego, she is completely thrown. Everything she had led herself to believe about Wickham over the past few months had been exposed as a lie, and she had been foolish in her estimation of Darcy's honor. Not only has she misjudged him to be dishonorable, she has had the audacity to accuse him of it to his face. At first, she is unwilling to believe his explanation, and her former prejudices tempt her to reexamine what he had written.

Within a minute of folding up the letter, Elizabeth takes it out again and attempts to consider its contents with a more objective mind than before. She focused her second reading on everything that related to Wickham, comparing the previous accounts she had received from him to Darcy's explanation of their connection. She was able to allow Mr. Darcy's account to be somewhat truthful because, detail for detail, their stories matched up until the particulars of the late Mr. Darcy's will was brought into the question. Elizabeth believed there to be a "gross duplicity on one side or the other" (157), and at first is unable to discern who the liar could be.

Her partiality for Wickham leads her to wish for his innocence, but she realizes that she must give some credit to Darcy's testimony because he referred her to Colonel Fitzwilliam, while Wickham had no one to verify his story. Elizabeth realizes that before meeting him on the street, she had never heard any recommendation of his character or account of his past before entering the Militia. Elizabeth is mortified because she had taken his easy manner and mild humor as an indication of excellent character. She chides herself, "...pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned"(159). Elizabeth is willing to give Darcy's story credence because she has now seen how imprudent her actions and judgments have been. Darcy's testimony is further validated in Elizabeth's mind because she holds Fitzwilliam in the highest regard and knows that Darcy would not have supplied him as a reference if his story had not been truthful.

After reconsidering how imprudent her estimation of Wickham's character had been, Elizabeth allows herself to review her opinion of Darcy's as well. An unexpected meeting at his home in Derbyshire gives her a glimpse of the real Mr. Darcy; a man of honor, character and respect. Towards the end of the novel, after Darcy has renewed his proposal and Elizabeth has accepted, she admits that it was his letter that first influenced the improvement of her feelings towards him. Without such a private communication on his part, she would have continued to judge him to be a man of ill character and never would have developed the strong inclination and respect she felt for him at the end of the novel.

Although Captain Wentworth of *Persuasion* composes his letter under different circumstances, its delivery is also concealed. He is prompted to write his declaration of love from the conversation he overhears Anne Elliot having with Captain Harville about the inconstancy of male emotion, specifically love. She believes that although men may from

strong attachments, they are not capable of maintaining them for long periods of time. She argues “we do not forget you, so soon as you forget us” (*Persuasion* 222) and as she says this, Wentworth drops his pen because he has been straining unconsciously to hear her conversation. Anne’s words were spoken to Captain Harville, but their meaning was meant for Wentworth alone. Her claim that a woman’s love spans both time and distance encourages him to hope that her own love is as unaltered as his own, and he expresses his hope in the form of a love letter.

Wentworth’s letter is, by far, the pinnacle of all love letters. His honesty, depth of feeling, and articulation of so overwhelming an attachment to Anne is unequalled in any other Austen novel. Wentworth tells her that she pierces his soul, and their undecided fate has put him into agony. Once again, as with Darcy’s letter, the writer is refuting a claim that the female recipient has made against him “by such means as are within [his] reach” (227). Anne and Wentworth have spent the entire novel putting up a front that they have never been anything other than indifferent acquaintances; therefore, to attempt an intimate meeting to discuss their misunderstanding would cause an incredible scandal.

Austen had not originally planned to incorporate such an explicit declaration of love. In *Persuasion’s* original ending, Wentworth was commissioned to write a letter officially announcing the rumored engagement of Anne and Mr. William Elliot, and Anne confides in him that she never had intended to marry Mr. Elliot. The published ending for the couple is much more feasible, because the likelihood of the two lovers being allowed to stay within the same room alone for such a long period of time is very small. Also, the letter offers Wentworth a chance to apologize and explain his recent vindictive behavior with Louisa Musgrove, whereas the original ending lacks any explanation of his actions. This redemption of his character is extremely important, because the reader’s estimation of Wentworth thus far in the novel has been based solely upon his actions and treatment to-

wards Anne. In order for the reader to understand why she has such a strong, lasting regard for him, it is necessary for Austen to display his genuinely good character as well as his own enduring affection for her that makes him worthy of such a woman as Anne Elliot.

Although some of the letters Austen creates are a secret, letter writing was primarily a public art form that was often judged by more people than just a letter’s recipient. In the case of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, the public nature of the letters ends up damaging the relationship of the two lovers involved. In the case of Harriet and Mr. Martin, the letter is shared with the wrong person and the budding affection Harriet feels towards him is squashed by Emma’s selfishness and sense of pride in her ability as a matchmaker. Conversely, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax’s private correspondence allows the two lovebirds to maintain a relationship without the criticism of other members of their society.

Had Harriet had kept Mr. Martin’s proposal to herself and not shown the letter to Emma, she might have found happiness with him much earlier in the novel, and avoided both her heartache over Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley. When Harriet first shares the letter with Emma, it is Emma’s intention to merely hint at her disapproval of such a match, and “for a little while Emma persevered in her silence; but beginning to apprehend the bewitching flattery of that letter might be too powerful, she thought it best to say” (*Emma* 47) that she felt it would be the right decision for Harriet to refuse Mr. Martin. If the letter had been kept out of Emma’s reach, she would have never been able to exert her power of manipulation over Harriet.

The beginning of *Sense and Sensibility* characterizes both Marianne and Willoughby as two people whose actions are completely driven by their emotions. Friends and family believe that despite their impulsive natures, they had been sensible enough to at least form an engagement that they preferred to keep secret. Given that both Marianne and Willoughby prefer all things dramatic, it would be understand-

able to think that two young lovers who cite the Romantic poet William Cowper among their favorite literary artists may want to keep their engagement under wraps to make it more exciting. Another way of making their relationship more exciting is by breaking social convention in order to communicate with one another via letters.

Not only are Marianne and Willoughby breaking social convention by writing to one another, they are doing it publicly. The public exchange of letters serves to accent the two characters' impetuosity, especially Marianne's. Austen employs this technique several times in the novel, focusing on making the writing of the letters develop her character in more vivid detail. Austen does not stop her characterization of Marianne with just the sending of the letters. She also provides the reader with the full text of what Marianne has said to Willoughby. Exposing Marianne's thoughts and feelings in such a manner serves to explain exactly how deep the relationship between she and Willoughby ran. Without providing the text of the letters, the reader would be left to speculate how deeply Marianne loved Willoughby, and how hurt she was by his cold actions at their meeting.

Her letters are unguarded and filled with emotional sentiment and esteem for Willoughby. In fact, her last letter is written while fighting off a fit of tears, demanding an explanation for his coldness to her when they were reacquainted after a long separation. She writes as fast as her pen will allow her, without taking the time to think about what might be proper to say on such an awkward occasion. There is such confidence in her words that leaves no room for doubt of his unchanged affection for her.

Marianne's repeated correspondence with Willoughby causes more harm than good. Choosing to defy the social customs that prevented single, unengaged men and women from writing to the opposite sex opens Marianne and Willoughby to public censure. Willoughby is deemed a rake for leading Marianne on and fueling an attachment that he had no intention of fulfilling. Marianne becomes the pitied pub-

lic figure who has acted too rashly and trusted too deeply. If the letters between the two lovers had been sent without public knowledge, both would have avoided some of the gossip that springs from their actions.

Through Marianne's final letter, Austen is trying to show both the strength of Marianne's attachment, as well as the imprudence of it. Such a communication is extremely ill-advised, because it leaves Marianne open to censure and ridicule for anyone who is allowed to read the letter. Consequently, when the last person who should lay eyes upon it, Miss Grey, gets hold of it, more pain and suffering than is necessary occurs. Marianne's openness sparks such a wave of jealousy and possessiveness in Miss Grey that she directs Willoughby to respond back in such a cold, heartless way that is completely uncharacteristic of him.

The content of Willoughby's response to Marianne is not romantic, but rather a rejection of her attachment towards him. When she shares the letter with her sister, Elinor is shocked that such a letter could have come from Willoughby's own hand. Knowing him to be of the same disposition as her sensitive sister, she finds it hard to believe that not only does he make no apology for his actions, but hazards the assumption that his affection for Marianne was imagined on her part. His indifference, in Elinor's eyes, "proclaimed him to be deep in hardened villainy" (*Sense and Sensibility* 137) and void of gentlemanly character.

Willoughby's response is equally, if not more important than Marianne's tearful letter. His letter is like a bucket of cold water dumped over the fiery, ardent love that Marianne harbors for him. Also, it eradicates any lingering hope the reader may entertain for him to be Marianne's knight in shining armor at the end of the novel. All respect and faith in his good character is gone and once the reader and Elinor are shown the heartless letter that he has sent rejecting Marianne. His character is damaged to the point that the reader does not want Marianne to end up with someone who is capable of causing her so much pain.

Austen does not keep her readers mystified by Willoughby's actions for the entire novel, but rather includes a scene between him and Elinor in which he explains why the letter had been written in such a cold manner. All the circumstances leading up to the letter's composition are accounted for, and Elinor comes to understand that Willoughby had been a scribe subject to his future wife's commands. He states, "I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to" (249). This meeting between protective sister and former lover ties up the loose ends that the letter itself leaves behind.

Although Willoughby's actions are better understood after this meeting, it is his letter that reminds the reader why Marianne and Willoughby do not reunite at the end of the novel. The letter hurts Marianne to the point that she cannot allow herself to become attached to anyone that holds a risk of hurting her so deeply again. Analysis of Willoughby's actions and letter, when compared with the observation of the kindness Colonel Brandon has unconditionally bestowed upon the entire Dashwood family, explains why Colonel

Brandon and Marianne decide to marry each other. Both harbor past scars that have reigned in their sensibilities, and Marianne knows that there is little risk that the Colonel could hurt her as Willoughby once did.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, letters serve as both a mode of explanation by the writer and a method of connection by Jane Austen. Although social customs made communication extremely difficult and guarded, these letters and subsequent discussions sparked, offer the reader a glimpse beyond civility and propriety and into the characters' minds and hearts. Both Mr. Darcy's and Captain Wentworth's letters justify their actions to their female recipients, whereas Willoughby's causes more confusion and hurt. Each letter's intention and content provide in-depth character insight for the reader and work to advance or resolve the plot in ways other literary means could not. Close examination of the letters provides the reader with a greater understanding of the characters who wrote them, the characters who read them, their intended purpose, and their importance to the composition of the novels.

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