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Love that Lasts

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During WWII, one of the most prominent forms of communication between soldiers and loved ones back home was writing and sending hand written letters. Even though they didn’t always arrive promptly, it was a way for families to continue their lives together regardless of the distance. One particular letter illustrates this point. Written on June 23, 1943 during the dead heat of World War II, Burton Jay Smith writes to his "dearest" Willametta Turnepseed from his military training post in Texas. Through looking at both a rhetorical analysis and historical context, it seems as though Burton writes this letter in hopes of keeping Willametta thinking about their lives together and their current occupational endeavors.

Because Burton and Willimetta's lives are both prominent in the letter, it is important to understand their background before delving into the letter. Burton writes from the Army Air Force Navigational School in San Marcos, Texas in the summer of 1943. While at training, Burton engages in writing letters to Willemetta back home. From the beginning of the letter, it is easy to tell that Burton and Willametta are emerged in a relationship based on the salutation, "Hello Dearest" (Smith 1943). Both amateur journalists and members of the National Amateur Press Association (NAPA), the couple was engaged to be married in May 1942. They both contributed to the journalistic world, Burton publishing a magazine, *Eisegesis* and many journals, while Willametta created many short stories
for *All-Story Love Stories* and *Smith’s Love Story Magazine*. Together, they started co-editing the journal Literary Newsette in 1941, and once Burton left for war, Willametta continued with the publication alone.

At the beginning of his writing, Burton’s first remark is, “Another day, another dollar” (Smith 1943), which gives the reader an insight to his feelings about being in the war. Although he may not particularly enjoy being away from his fiancé, he feels that fighting for his country is something that he must do. He does not directly address the topic of their separation, implying that he does not want Willametta to worry about him. In addition, he keeps this brief and moves on with talking about their future. This rhetorical technique is very important because according to Heinrichs (2013), if Burton were to remain talking about his current situation, he could possibly become closer with Willametta, or run the risk of growing farther apart. Burton does not wish to take this chance, and so in turn continues on with the future. This tactic seems to be effective because when looking at other letters between Willametta and Burton, the couple continues to discuss their lives together.

After his opening statement, Burton jumps to their future. He refers to a series of documents called Hadley’s Collection by writing that he and Willametta will need room for a library, but it won’t be that hard, since Hadley’s Collection can fit in about a six by ten foot stack. This collection is a compilation of professional and family materials that belonged to three generations of the Hadley family that lived primarily from the 1820s to the 1970s in New Haven, Connecticut. James Hadley, from the first generation of these writings, was a Greek professor at Yale beginning in 1851 and is the owner of most of the documents enclosed in this collection. Included is an assortment of diary entries during his teaching at Yale, as well as decisions for class disputes and some of
his own manuscripts. In addition, James’ wife, Anne and his
daughter in law, Helen, also make appearances in the collection,
including documents such as Sunday school notes, scrapbooks and
photographs from Helen’s childhood. By referring to this particular
series, Burton specifically appeals to his audience—Willametta. He
uses ethos by choosing an item - in this case Hadley's Collection -
that Willametta can easily compare the size of their amateur
collection to. This is an important tool if Burton wishes to relate to
Willametta, and could keep her interested in marriage even though
they are apart. This is just one rhetorical aspect found in Burton's
letter to Willametta that provides an effective way to engage his
audience.

Image: Albert Hadley (left), son of James, is pictured here with President Taft
(Yale Manuscripts & Archives Digital Image Database).

The most prominent theme the reader notices throughout the letter
is that Burton talks about what is to come in the future with his
fiancé. This shows in the last line of Burton's letter when he writes:
"I do strain to the future when all our wonderful plans can come
true" (Smith, 1943). He does not linger on the reality that they are
apart during this time, but instead makes plans with Willametta. It
is as if his life in this moment is almost nonexistent, but their life in
the future will mean everything to him. By talking about the future
and not the present, Burton is using the rhetorical tactic of
controlling his tense. It is important to use the future tense because it means that Burton is promising something for he and Willametta. He is certain that when he returns, they will be together. Burton uses this technique in order to keep Willametta's attention focused on the future.

Overall, Burton wants to make sure that he will have a life with Willametta when he returns from the war. He is able to do this through the use of not focusing on his current position in training, but instead continuing to discuss their future together. This tactic is used not only in letters during war, but can also be found throughout many people's lives. When handed a difficult situation, it is easy to get caught up in it and think that nothing will ever get better. But it is extremely important to look into life after these hard times. Life will still go on, and we must go with it, just as Burton illustrates through his letters.

Click here to read the letter from Burton to Willametta

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Reference List


