Furlough and For Love: An Examination of John N. Calhoun

Kristofer Yambao

University of Iowa
The Last Letter

By: Elise Kerns

As a published writer and an avid reader, Willametta Turnepseed’s writing drips with rhetorical methods and a crafty use of language. Willametta makes many references to several pivotal events in history, like the presidential election of 1944, yet she chooses not to go particularly in depth with these events or references but instead defines other more provincial things like “Building-and-loan day”. These vague references to historical events but extensive definitions of casual occurrences suggest that she makes several assumptions concerning her fiancé’s knowledge of current affairs but she chooses still to define relatively commonplace things. This in turn helps keep her letter grounded and domestic suggesting that she might believe the war and the state of the nation itself might seem farther away if they’re left rather ambiguous. Turnepseed wrote for a magazine of romantic short stories called “All-Story Love Stories”, and her experience is seen in her language and references to past great works that boost her rhetorical ethos without seeming elitist or overly showy since she has no need to prove her experience to her fiancé. Her reference to “The Eternal Feminine” makes Willametta appear well-read and keeps her writing educated, while her light, often sarcastic, tone keeps the letter personal, colloquial, and intimate.
Turnepseed also reveals a lot about the nature of her relationship with her fiance through her use of language. Initially, she refers to her family as “my understanding family”, placing an emphasis on her personal possession of them. Later, she refers to her parents as simply “Mother” and “Dad” instead of “my Mother” and “my Dad” which suggests that her relationship with Burton was intimate in those realms since her familial references were made with his inclusion as a family member in mind. His inclusion in matters is seen constantly as Turnepseed continues to make plans with Burton in mind rather than tentatively suggesting he may or may not be there. By keeping her language focused on the future and using inclusive linguistics she helps make her fiance feel more at home and optimistic and shifts the focus away from the current horror of war. In fact, throughout the letter the only time Willametta actually refers to the war is when she talks of victory and success. Instead of mentioning any kind of defeat or loss or even saying “I miss you”, she refers to the future and the ways the United States has been successful abroad and at home and chooses instead to say “I feel you are all right”. Her inclusive language appeals
emotionally while her focus on the future adds rhetorical credibility. The shift of focus concerning the prospect of the war’s end keeps the letter positive and the mood light while still touching on relevant topics such as politics and the global perspective of the war. Her methods all center on her goal of masking her concerns for her husband’s safety while still making him feel like the correspondence is intimate.

Willametta also uses many rhetorical strategies to make the letter seem natural and conversational including rhetorical questions to help Burton feel closer to her. Her use of interjections and playful use of punctuation also help make her letter seem more down-to-earth and accessible as she appeals emotionally to the desires of her fiance to be closer to her and hear her voice in her writing. Her voice can also be heard in her sarcasm such as putting her colleague’s “nervous attack” in quotes to show her disbelief and playfully suggesting the author of “The Eternal Feminine” is also the author of an anonymous political newspaper. Colloquialisms like “swankier” and “wizz” also help give her writing life and voice. Willametta’s writing ultimately aims to make her fiance feel closer to her and distracted from the war, she does this through language that gives her words personality and looks forward towards his return.

In her letter Turnepseed talks of several historical events including the presidential election between Dewey and Roosevelt. Citing an anonymous political pamphlet she quotes some of the anti-Dewey views prior to the election, including the view that Dewey’s stance against racism meant that he “worked among Negroes”. Dewey, campaigning against the New Deal, was at a disadvantage in attempting to run against a wildly popular incumbent who set
himself against the backdrop of an army that was successful abroad with the Allies with the recent liberation of France. The pamphlet is both a prime representation of political propaganda in the 1940s and a representation of the era’s mass movement of ideas. TIME magazine is also given as an example of widespread communication during war time, and Willametta’s mention of it serves to represent how men and women back home garnered hope for the end of the war and information about its endeavors through media. Turnepseed’s quote from the pamphlet demonstrates the intense language used against the candidates in the ’44 election: an indication of its voracity and intensity. Willametta refers to the infamous “V-Day”, named for victory with Germany’s predicted surrender. She mentions TIME’s revised name of the day to be “X-Day” seeing as the day will not be a victory for all, and instead an “unknown quantity” will be lost and won. The quote concerning TIME magazine’s preferred name for the end of the war demonstrates her views concerning the ripple effect of the war and her own views on the global span of its violence. Unfortunately, its optimistic mention is bleak since it would still be months before that day would come, and a whole year before the war itself would be over.

Turnepseed also refers to the “troop train”, a cross-country army and cargo train that took its cars to ports and war fronts. In the letter she refers to a friend who took the train but had to have an emergency operation during the trip. Just two months prior to
her letter the United States experienced the second worst stateside military disaster of the entire second world war: the great Troop Train Wreck of 1944. The wreck killed hundreds to thousands of troops and caused countless injuries. Willametta’s mention of the train is rather nonchalant, but the friend, Bob Northrup, was likely very weary about the trip and it was probably incredibly nerve-wracking for Willametta and Burton to think of their friend in danger abroad. Ultimately the fragility of human life was symbolized through concerns of war. Fear for the journey to battles further ingrained that terror. The political battles that garnered support through attacks and angst all represent what Willametta was trying to distract from by using inclusive language and defining terms at home. The concerns Willametta felt and her fear resonated in all things, and they were concerns that left no family untouched. The war and its immensity had the vast ability to render households and loved ones heartbroken, distraction and nonchalance helped keep that looming angst at bay.

*Image: The Great Troop Train Crash of ‘44*
Willametta’s last line, “I feel you are all right”, sums up her letter in its entirety since its entirely optimistic, personal, and distracted from the terror of war. Her words were never read by her love, but they are not diminished because of this. Rather, the soliloquy she presents instead is vastly indicative of countless attempts by women of the war to reassure their loved ones of the promise of home and prospect of renewal. The letter gives a distinct voice to many of the countless women widowed by the death of their fiancés and husbands abroad. The women were left with only the memories of their loved ones and the echo of their personhood. Willametta’s letter attempts to do one thing above all else and that is to make her fiancé feel at home. Her distractions, optimism, and wit all attempt to erase the boundaries of war and remind her love that she is there for him: even if he never comes home.
Example of how Willametta uses stickers.

Images of the letter:

Pg. 1 of the letter

Pg. 2 of the letter


Burton Jay Smith photograph, between 1942 and 1944 :: World War II Diaries and Letters. (n.d.).


http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/transcribe/scripto/transcribe/3246/83295