Love, Clarence

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Clarence Clark, Comparisons and Camp Claiborne

Rhetorical Analysis:

Clarence Clark certainly had a soft spot for Ms. Evelyn Birkby. This letter, written on May 3, 1941, is Clarence’s response to Evelyn’s most recent correspondence. In it, he describes the daily goings-on of Camp Claiborne, where he is currently stationed. He also spends a good amount of time subtly hinting about the potential of a relationship between Evelyn and himself. Rhetorically, Clarence’s goals in this letter are to get sympathy from Evelyn as well as make himself as appealing as possible; he accomplishes these tasks by making clever complaints and comparing himself to other people in his division.

In much of this letter, Clarence finds ways to gain Evelyn’s sympathy by subtly injecting complaints into his writing; to do so, he uses specific numbers and times. For example, he says “We have to get up at 5:00 am in the morning and don't get off until 5:00 pm so it makes a rather long day,” and “We work 50 minutes and rest ten out of every hour.” By listing his specific schedule, rather than just saying he has to work a long time, Clarence makes his situation more definitive and readily imagined, which invokes sympathy in his reader. Also, by refraining from making big complaints about his work, instead just saying that twelve hours of work and only about two cumulative hours for rest amount to “a rather long day,” Clarence keeps himself from sounding whiny or annoying. This use of understatement makes him seem like a hard worker instead of a complainer, which presents him in a positive
light to the woman he wishes to be with. He also states “I'm glad you got the raise and like it there. Suppose the $10 gave you a big thrill. The $100.00 cut in my wages sure didn't.” Here, Clarence starts his latest bid for sympathy by giving Evelyn a compliment, making her feel appreciative for the acknowledgement. Then, he hits home by contrasting their financial lots. By making Evelyn feel good first, Clarence sets her up to then feel guilty about her good fortune as compared to his. With guilt established, he is more likely to obtain her sympathies, as she feels bad for having it better than him. All of these tactics serve to get Evelyn on Clarence’s side, as well as establish his character in a positive and appealing way.

Clarence further works to paint himself in as appealing a light as possible by contrasting himself with other men. He says that the other soldiers have gone off to the nearby town, but "I haven't been in yet and don't imagine I will for awhile. I'll still take a drink once in awhile but I don't go in for all of rest." This seems to be an important point for Clarence to make, as he also mentions in later letters that he doesn't drink much. By stating this, Clarence hopes to show that he is levelheaded and not prone to drinking, which is often considered a negative habit. Given that association, he makes himself look better next to the other soldiers in his division who do go out.

Clarence works hard to obtain sympathy from Evelyn through understated complaints and comparisons, as well as make himself look good by comparing himself with other men at Camp Claiborne. His main goal is to persuade her to go out with him once again, and while in the long run that may not work out, he does make effective emotional appeals and comparisons that at least continues to draw her interest and companionship.
Historical Analysis:

Camp Claiborne was a base in Louisiana that started training soldiers to prepare for war in early 1941. Clarence’s division, the 34th infantry, or Red Bull Division, received much of its basic training there. This letter serves as an important historical document because it reveals how life at Camp Claiborne was as well as gives insight to some of the common perceptions and trends of the time period.

Most of what Clarence said in his letter addressed the day-to-day events at Claiborne, rather than those military. He did mention his training, but spent much more time on things such as what he got to do during his time off. So, I went searching for sources that would give me information on the inner workings of Claiborne, not just what was deigned historically significant.

I struck gold when I found a series of microfilms at the State Historical Society of Iowa that contained multiple pages of The Clarion, the weekly newspaper of the 34th Division. Incredibly, one of the editions was printed on April 26, 1941, exactly a week before Clarence wrote his letter. Upon reading through it, I found that there was something in the paper for almost everything Clarence mentioned. For example, Clarence says that “The camp is located about 18 miles from Alexander and a lot of the fellows have gone there for the rest of the day.” He meant to write Alexandria, which is a town in Louisiana that was 18 to 19 miles away from the camp and was the soldiers’ biggest chance for a change of scenery at the time. As Clarence mentions in his letter, it would have frequent shows that soldiers could go to. However, as time went on and nearby camps Livingston, Beauregard, and Polk filled with soldiers,
the townspeople became a little less receptive to having soldiers constantly at their door. So, the soldiers had to find other places to go as well, which proved to be fairly easy.

One of the first headlines I found in The Clarion advertised two events for the 34th division: one to a dance, the other a sightseeing trip to New Orleans. Interestingly, both events were scheduled to occur on May 3, the same day Clarence wrote his letter. So, some of the soldiers he talked about with Evelyn may very well have gone to one of those events.

Also, Clarence mentions that he is “still wearing heavy woolen clothes down here in this hot weather.” When the men of cold states such as Iowa and Minnesota came to Louisiana, they expected to find warm weather, but instead were met with barrages of rain and chilling winds. They were unprepared then, and when it did get warmer, the camp was once again unprepared for the change and lacked the clothes the soldiers needed. Clarence's little comments about the weather reflect the moods and feelings of entire groups of men at the camp. All of these moments, while they may seem small or irrelevant to history, combine to show the lifestyles and living conditions of soldiers in pre-war America.

Clarence’s letter, whether purposefully or not, shows some of the conventions and trends going on at the time. As I mentioned in my screencast, his comment about how he could be a good “wife” because he is great at washing his clothes and dishes indicates how gender roles were perceived in the early 1940s. Even
though more women were working, it was still commonplace for women to be viewed as housewives or housekeepers. It was interesting to see how that role was still so solidly in place, knowing that in a couple of years’ time women would have taken up the mantle of working the “male jobs” while the men were off at war.

This letter is historically significant, as it provides information on the every day actions of soldiers within Camp Claiborne, which is largely unavailable in most of the other published sources about the camp. It also reveals some of the conventions of the time period, such as the perception of women’s role as stay at home housewives. Beyond this, it shows how quickly trends can change, as women would soon fill many of the jobs men would have normally held. Clarence's letter is a rare source, chronicling information that many historians have deemed unimportant in the retelling of pre-World War II history, as well as showing the speed in which human perceptions can change.

Written By: Katie Campbell

Resources:


