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Abraham Stoker to Walt Whitman, 18 February 1872

About This Item

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Date: February 18, 1872

Creator(s): Abraham Stoker

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Back to top ↑

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43 Harcourt St Dublin
Ireland

18-2.72
Feb-18, 1872

If you are the man I take you to be you will like to get this letter. if you are not I don't care whether you like it or not, and only ask you to put it into the fire without reading any farther. But I believe you will like it. I dont think there is a man living, even you who are above the prejudices of the class of small-minded men—who wouldn't like to get a letter from a younger man, a stranger from across the world—a man living in an atmosphere prejudiced to the truths you sing and your manner of singing them. The idea that arises in my mind is whether there is a man living who would have the pluck to burn a letter in which he felt the smallest atom of interest without reading it. I believe you would and that you believe you would yourself—You can burn this now if you like and test yourself and all I will ask for my trouble of writing this letter, which for all I can tell you may light your pipe with or apply to some more ignoble purpose—is that you will in some manner let me know that my words have tested your impatience. Put it in the fire if you like—but if you do you will miss the pleasure of this next sentence which ought to be that you have conquered an unworthy impulse. A man who is uncertain of his own strength might try to encourage himself by a piece of bravo, but a man who can write, as you have written, the most candid words that ever fell from the lips of mortal man can have no fear for his own strength.—a man to whose candour Rousseau's Confessions[1] is reticence—can have no fear for his own strength. If you have gone this far you may read the letter and I feel in writing now that I am talking to you. If I were before your face I would like to shake hands with you for I feel that I would like you—I would like to call you Comrade and to talk

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to you as men who are not poets do not often talk.[2] I think that at first I would be ashamed for a man cannot in a moment break the habit of comparative reticence that has become a second nature to him; but I know I would not be long ashamed to be natural before you. You are a true man and I would like to be one myself and so I would feel towards you as a brother and as a pupil to his master. In this age no man becomes worthy of the name without an effort. You have shaken off the shackles and your wings are free. I have the shackles on my shoulders still.—but I have no wings. If you are going to read this letter any further I should tell you that I am not prepared to "give up all else" so far as words go. The only thing I am prepared to give up is prejudice—and before I knew you I had begun to throw overboard my cargo—but it is not all gone yet. I do not know how you will take this letter. I have not adressed you in any form as I have heard that you dislike to a certain degree the conventional forms in letters. I am writing to you because you are different from other men. if you were the same as the mass I would not write at all as it is I must either call you Walt Whitman or not call you at all—and I have chosen the latter course. I do not know if it is usual for you to get letters from utter strangers who have not even the claim of literary brotherhood to write to you—if it is you must be frightfully tormented with letters and I am sorry to have written this. I have however the claim of liking you—for your words are your own soul and even if you do not read my letter it is no less a pleasure to me to write it. Shelley[3] wrote to William Godwin[4] and they became friends. I am not Shelley and you are not Godwin & so I will only hope that some time

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I may meet you face to face and perhaps shake hands with you—If I ever do it will be one of the greatest pleasures of my life. If you care to know who it is that writes this my name is Abraham Stoker (Junior). My friends call me Bram. I live at no 43 Harcourt St Dublin. I am a clerk in the service of the Crown on a small salary. I am twenty four years old. Have been champion at our athletic sports (Trinity College Dublin) and have won about a dozen cups. I have also been President of the College Philosophical Society and an art and theatrical critic of a daily paper. I am six feet two inches high and 12 stone weight naked and used to be 41 or 42 inches round the chest. I am ugly but strong and determined and have a large bump over my eyebrows. I have a heavy jaw and a big mouth with thick lips—sensitive nostrils—a snub nose and straight hair. I am equal in temper and cool in disposition and have a large amount of self control, and am naturally secretive to the world. I take a delight in letting people I don't like—people of mean or cruel or sneaking or cowardly disposition—see the worst side of me. I have a large number of acquaintances and some five or six friends—all of which latter body care much for me. Now I have told you all I know about myself. I know you from your works and your photograph; and if I know anything about you I think you would like to know of the personal appearance of your correspondents. You are I know a keen physiognomist. I am a believer of the science myself and am in an humble way a practicer of it. I was not disappointed when I saw your photograph—your late one in especial. The way I came to

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like you was this. A notice of your poems appeared some two years ago or more in the "Temple Bar" magazine.[5] I glanced at it and took its dictum as final, and laughed at you among my friends. I say it to my own shame but not to my regret for it has taught me a lesson to last my life out—without ever having seen your poems. More than a year after I heard two men in College talking of you, one of them had your book (Rossetti's Edition)[6] and was reading aloud some passages at which both laughed. They chose only those passages which are most foreign to British ears and made fun of them. Something struck me that I had judged you hastily. I took home the volume and read it far into the night. Since then I have to thank you for many happy hours, for I have read your poems with my door locked late at night, and I have read them on the sea shore where I could look all round me and see no more sign of human life than the ships out at sea: and here I often found myself waking up from a reverie with the book lying open before me. I love all poetry and high generous thoughts make the tears rush to my eyes—but sometimes a word or a phrase of yours takes me away from the world around me and places me in an ideal land surrounded by realities more than any poem I ever read. Last year I was sitting on the beach on a summer's day reading your preface to the Leaves of Grass as printed in Rossetti's Edt., for Rossetti is all I have got till I get the complete set of your works which I have ordered

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from America). One thought struck me and I pondered over it for several hours—"the weather-beaten vessels old ships entering new ports"[7] you who wrote the words know them better than I do: and to you who sing of your own land of Progress the words have a meaning that I can only imagine. But be assured of this Walt Whitman that a man of less than half your own age reared a conservative in a conservative country and who has always heard your name cried down by the great mass of people who mention it here felt his heart leap towards you across the Atlantic, and his soul swelling at the words or rather the thoughts. It is vain for me to try to quote any instances of what thoughts of yours I like best, for I like them all and you must feel that you are reading the true words of one who feels with you. You see I have called you by your name I have been more candid with you—have said more about myself to you than I have ever said to any one before—You will not be angry with me now if you have read so far you will not laugh at me for writing thus to you. It was with no small effort that I began to write and I feel reluctant to stop, but I must not tire you any more. If you ever would care to have more you can imagine, for you have a great heart, how much pleasure it would be to me to write more to you, how sweet a thing it is for a strong healthy man with a woman's eyes and a child's wishes to feel that he can speak so to a man who can be if he wishes father, and brother and wife to his soul" (Charles E. Feinberg Collection; Horace Traubel, ed., *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Wednesday, May 15, 1889). Stoker visited Whitman in 1884 (Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (1955), 516).

Correspondent:
Abraham ("Bram") Stoker (1847–1912) was the author of *Dracula*, secretary to Sir Henry Irving, and editor of *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906). As a young man, on February 18, 1872, Stoker wrote a personal, eccentric letter to Walt Whitman, which he did not send until February 14, 1876 (Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Tuesday, February 19, 1889). In the earlier letter he had written: "How sweet a thing it is for a strong healthy man with a woman's eyes and a child's wishes to feel that he can speak so to a man [Walt Whitman] who can be if he wishes, father, and brother and wife to his soul" (Charles E. Feinberg Collection; Horace Traubel, ed., *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Wednesday, May 15, 1889).

Notes

1. The *Confessions* of the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) were published posthumously in 1782. [back]

2. According to Horace Traubel, when he read this letter aloud to Whitman in 1889, the poet remarked that Stoker "was a sassy youngster: as to burning the epistle up or not—it never occurred to me to do anything at all: what the hell did I care whether he was pertinent or impertinent? he was fresh, breezy, Irish: that was the price paid for admission—and enough: he was welcome!" (Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Tuesday, February 19, 1889, 182) [back]

3. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was an English lyric poet and central figure of the Romantic movement. [back]

4. William Godwin (1756–1836) was an English utilitarian/anarchist philosopher and bookshop owner. He was married to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), the early British feminist author who penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and his daughter was Mary Godwin (1797–1859), who, after her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley, gained fame as Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* (1818). [back]

5. *Temple Bar—A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers* (1860–19067), known as *Temple Bar* to most readers, was a London literary periodical. [back]

6. William Michael Rossetti prepared a British edition of Whitman's writings called *Poems by Walt Whitman* that John Camden Hotten published in 1868. About half of the poems from the 1867 American edition of *Leaves of Grass* were removed for the British edition. In his twenty-seven page "Prefatory Notice," Rossetti justified his editorial decisions, which included editing potentially objectionable content and removing entire poems: "My choice has proceeded upon two simple rules: first, to omit entirely every poem which could with any tolerable fairness be deemed offensive to the feelings of morals or propriety in this peculiarly nervous age; and, second, to include every remaining poem which appeared to me of conspicuous beauty or interest." For more information on this book, see Edward Whitley, "Introduction to the British Editions of *Leaves of Grass*." [back]

7. Stoker is quoting from the preface to *Leaves of Grass*. [back]

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