The Letter

Definition

A letter is a written message, used to transmit information between two people or parties. Across different time periods and geographical locations, letters have been written upon a variety of media, ranging from tanned animal skin to blocks of wood or slate. More recently, letters are written (or printed) on paper, which is made from processed wood fibre.

Yet, these scrolls would have remained blank were it not for the instruments from which words flow- the carving knife, the quill, the pen, and their various, multitudinous iterations across history. Going further, one also has to consider the tools used in the support and upkeep of these instruments, such as the grindstone, the eraser, the stapler... the list goes on.

Figure 1: Letter with wax seal

History

Letters have existed for as long as humans have known how to write. While the form and function of the letter has varied wildly across different regions and time periods, its various iterations have all served as non-verbal documentation via which knowledge is transmitted.

For brevity’s sake, this article will primarily focus on the letter in the context of 18th century Victorian England, a period marked by a shift in its functionality. Where letters had been primarily conceived as mere agents of communication between two individuals, the 18th century witnessed a transition, where the publishing of letters for public consumption and entertainment became widespread. Letters then evolved into a means for authors to construct their personal identity for the public eye- a marked departure from the previously more authentic correspondence between individuals.

There were a number of factors that led to this phenomenon. Chief amongst them was the establishment of a centralised delivery network, which massively expedited the speed at which letters were sent to recipients. Prior to its creation, letters had to be delivered by couriers or acquaintances who happened to be travelling to the location of the intended recipient- methods which were unreliable and inefficient, and hence limited both the volume and frequency of post. The formation of an official postal service, though dogged by its own problems and inconsistencies, provided authors with a tolerable alternative to personal letter bearers. It allowed for much lower turnaround times which catalysed the rapid exchange of information between writer and recipient; this in turn led to a far larger volume of correspondence between writer and recipient.
Another event, without which the widespread distribution of letters would have been impossible, was the invention and mass production of the industrial printing press. Wherebefore, the relative inefficiency of the traditional printing press meant that copies were produced at a much slower rate, its industrial counterpart churned them out with ruthless efficiency. The implication of this was, of course, that it became much easier (and hence more commonplace) for individuals to publish their own writings, in the forms of books, newspapers, and of course, collections of letters.

All in all, this perfect storm resulted in a massive democratization of information, whereby knowledge became much more readily available to the public, as opposed to being concentrated in the hands of a select few elites.

**Framing**

The central function of the letter was, and always will be, to convey a message. Yet, the manner via which such messages are transmitted is one that relies primarily on the sense of sight, where the ability of the recipient to decipher, interpret and understand the letters (ha!) on the page becomes vital to the utility of the letter itself.

As such, it would not be unreasonable to assert that the rise of literacy is inexorably intertwined with that of the letter. While previously, the advent of the book represented the first departure from what had been a purely oral tradition of passing down knowledge, the inefficiency of methods with which to reproduce these books, as well as the low level of education at the time, rendered them largely unavailable to the large majority of the population. These tomes were scared objects that were viewed as conduits to the wisdom of an unreachable past, essentially to the continuity of mankind’s shared knowledge.

Fast forward to 18th century England, though, and a tectonic shift in the way knowledge was presented can be observed. The widespread preservation and publishing of letters meant that the common man was increasingly able to frame his personal opinions as fact. The consumption and creation of knowledge was no longer the exclusive domain of the scholar.

**Contingencies**

It could be argued that the letter is a culmination of various forms of human knowledge with regard to the art of writing and recording. Yet, a letter is distinct from a message- it is a manifestation of said message in physical form. An object’s permanence and accessibility are crucial factors in determining whether or not it can be constituted as a letter. In a way, letters functioned as intermediaries between the realms of private and public information, the predecessors to the social media networks of today- where anyone can post anything, and where rumour and unverified half-truths spread like wildfire.

This isn’t as negative as it seems- the proliferation of falsehoods and ‘fake news’ is but one of the many consequences of the democratization of knowledge. Perhaps this could even lead to the development of a new kind of knowledge- the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and opinion.

**See also:**

- Paper
- Writing and Imperial China
- The Wiki
References


