Ashley Minor

ENGL 4505

Dr. Eberle

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Fanfiction: Letters to the Dead

Summary: I use an epistolary form to give insight and alternative explanations for Mr. Woodhouse’s valetudinarianism, Emma’s insistence on match-making, and Isabella’s avoidance of visiting Hartfield: essentially, Mrs. Woodhouse’s death is the cause to many of the effects in Jane Austen’s *Emma*.

*The loss of Mrs. Woodhouse was felt by all of Highbury. The anxieties of a premature death were reserved for expecting mothers, so the shock of Mrs. Woodhouse dying by a simple, common cold resonated deeply within the community. However, the impact was felt most sharply by the remaining residents of Hartfield. In her wake, two young children are left to navigate themselves through English society, while their dependent father reels from such a tragic loss.*

Letter the first

From Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

My darling wife,

I desperately wish to be speaking these words in person. If only I had known the importance of a simple conversation a few days ago. There is so much left to be said and no more time to say it. Therefore, I have resolved to writing them. However, written words are such an inferior form of communication. Words can never adequately express the sentiments that I have been burdened with in the moments since your death. Such is my eternal punishment for not understanding the true value of your companionship. This may seem to be a selfish pursuit, writing to you in death. Yet, I am of the opinion that it is the living we ought to pity and grieve. The dead get an afterlife while the living get to live… but calling it a ‘life’ is too generous a definition. It does seem strange how we attend so carefully to the dead yet neglect to grieve for the parts of ourselves that died with them. I must now resolve to the notion that the best of my life has ended with you, and I shall live my days content in the memories of our life together.

It is, however, just the beginning of our girls’ lives. I dread the coming days knowing that they will yearn for your loving attention and guidance. They have not yet developed enough understanding to comprehend the full reach of the consequences resulting from your death. Perhaps, I have not either. Still, I am able to find comfort in seeing so much of you in them; even little Emma resembles you so! I believe that they will, too, come to find comfort in the similarities that they share with you. It will be their strength during moments of weakness and a lasting gift from you… for even as their memories fade, their connection to you will not.

Even now, it is apparent that we have lost far more than a mother and a wife, and the weight will continue to settle on us in the coming days. I pray for your direction and wisdom.

Your loving husband

H.W.

Letter the second

From Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

My dearest wife,

It has now been several months since your passing. What a strange sensation it is to have gone months without your love and companionship. At times, I feel the weight of your loss with such an intense force; moving from moment to moment with not the slightest awareness to my actions. I have found myself clinging to our old way of life, even the smallest of changes are most unwelcome. However, I now see that the girls are in want of a mother figure. Being that I am not ready for another wife, nor will I ever be, I have decided to hire a governess for them. Miss Taylor has the most agreeable personality and character. She can be a youthful confidante for our Emma and a worthy companion for dear Isabella. She will in no way rival the love and devotion a mother has for their child, but her presence will be essential for the girls’ growth and well-being. It is the first decision to be made without your influence, and certainly not the last, but always with you in mind.

H.W.

Letter the third

From Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

My darling,

Miss Taylor has finally settled into Hartfield. What was once unimaginable is now a part of everyday living; another woman fills the halls of Hartfield to care for our daughters. Isabella has taken well to having another figure at the estate. Always a more solitary creature, she does at least seek out the care of Miss Taylor often enough. Emma, however, has taken a strong dislike to her new governess. She insists that a governess will be no companion of hers. Only under your instruction and guidance would she have been ‘governed’. Alas, unlike you, Miss Taylor is a woman of little accomplishment and low birth. Yet, she does seem to possess a gentle spirit, one that is motherly and kind-hearted. I am not equipped to deal with such quarrels. I shall hope that they will come to genuine companionship over time.

I must admit that I have felt your death most strongly today. I have found no reprieve from the anguish; which. of course, only speaks to the excellence of your character. Grief has settled into every crack and crevice of Hartfield, every fiber in my body, and every thought in my mind. There is a numbing sensation that veils the entirety of my day. I rely entirely on the kindness of the servants and the encouragement of the girls to lead me from moment to moment. I will concede to enjoying one aspect of my new routine; I get to interact more fully with Isabella and Emma. They are delightful girls, just like their mother.

With love

H.W.

Letter the fourth

From Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

To my Beloved-

Despite their initial dealings with one another, Miss Taylor has proven to be the most charming friend for our Emma. Emma will be relying more and more on their kinship in the coming years; for darling Isabella has entered an engagement with the Mr. John Knightley of Donwell Abbey. Such a respectable family, especially Mr. George Knightley. He is the more agreeable of the two men. Yet, I cannot help but fret over the impending marriage. After they are wed, he will be stealing her away to London of all places. The city is no place for a woman of Isabella’s character and well-being. She will be removed so far from Hartfield and surrounded by strange persons of no consequence, or at least not like those of consequence in Highbury. How can he expect her to leave Highbury and remain happy and in good health? She cannot remain so while breathing in such sickly air and Mr. Perry cannot be expected to travel so many miles to provide her care. I find the pairing to be most displeasing. Yet, Isabella insists that you would approve, and I must yield to her wishes.

Yours forever,

H.W.

Letter the fifth

Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

Dearest one,

I must begin to ask myself, how much time can be allotted for a widow to grieve? Years have passed but your memory has not. I could not help but see you today as Isabella walked down the aisle. Even in in the moments most worthy of celebration, there is a lingering sense of sadness. I know how much you wished to see our girls grow and flourish into women of good reputation and character. I must say that they have succeeded, more by their own merit than anything that could be spoken of in my favor. You would have thoroughly enjoyed the occasion, for it was the sort of affair you would have relished in attending. All of Highbury came to join in the festivities and admire our Isabella. I perceived that it was a rather joyous event for those in attendance, although a few expressed disappointment at there being no cake to enjoy. I cannot understand why anyone would indulge themselves with cake. Do they not understand it is bad for one’s health? Regardless, Isabella was picturesque. It aches me that you were not there to see her.

As Isabella is now the new Mrs. Knightley, I must admit to feeling a great sense of loss; not dissimilar the emotions relating to your death. It was rather painful to give away her hand in marriage knowing that she will no longer live within the walls of Hartfield. I can no longer ensure that she resists the temptation to eat past dinnertime, that she takes proper precautions against the cold, or remembers to stay vigilant for the vagrants of society that reside in London. It would bring me such relief to have her reside closer to Highbury, yet I know that is an impossibility. I know very little of the city, nor do I plan to familiarize myself. I cannot predict the kind of life she will be exposed to while residing in such an environment. One can only hope that Mr. John Knightley will be able to afford a home easily accessible by an apothecary and only a short distance from women of equal consequence. Such an issue must be addressed immediately, for it will not be long before they begin to have children. Child-bearing can be a dreadful endeavor for young women. I could not endure the loss of poor Isabella as well. I surely would perish from heartbreak.

If only you were here to speak with her. It would be far more effective from a mother; a person with the ability to nurture and encourage as only a mother can. I hope she will be able to visit Hartfield often. For now, I must rely on the care and company of Emma and Miss Taylor until Isabella comes back.

With love

H.W.

Letter the sixth

Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbury

My dearest wife,

I was just reminded that is the fifteenth anniversary of your passing. I have now been a widower longer than the length of our marriage. A strange realization, to be sure. I have often been advised to enter a courtship and find another Mrs. Woodhouse. However, I am not a man in want of a wife. I wish to remain as stagnant as possible. Every step forward is another step away from you. To some, it may seem that I am unnecessarily allowing myself to wallow in grief. Yet, they do not understand that the, now scarred, wounds of your death are just another form of memory. The scars are a part of me now and I will not part with them. It would do your memory no justice if I were to be remarried. It would not be beneficial to darling Emma either. She already has a mother figure in Miss Taylor. They are so close, and I would not want anything to interfere with their relationship. I have decided that a brief sense of fulfillment is better than never having felt it at all, and I am content to live the rest of my days just as I am now.

Yours forever,

H.W.

Letter the seventh

Mr. Woodhouse to Mrs. Woodhouse

Hartfield Estate, Highbubry

My darling-

It seems that Hartfield must suffer the loss of another female presence. I have just received the news that Miss Taylor is now engaged to Mr. Weston of Randalls Estate. Emma is elated by the news. She has recently taken up the act of match-making, a rather silly hobby in my opinion, but mostly harmless. I fear she is not fully aware of the repercussions of Miss Taylor’s engagement. She was quite young when you passed away and her remaining memories have faded over the years. It is my belief that she will experience a deep sense of loss with Miss Taylor removed from the house. She argues that Randalls is in walking distance, which is true and frequent visits will be expected. However, Miss Taylor will now take the role of a wife and abandon the role of a governess. No longer will she able to dote on Emma. I must admit to wanting to prolong the wedding as much as possible, for Emma’s sake as much as my own. It will be a lonesome existence with just Emma and myself living in Hartfield. I no longer have the good health to provide Emma with proper guidance in companionship. Though, she is taking the task in stride and approaching it with an eagerness few people possess. I can only hope that the impending marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston does not begin a series of misadventures on Emma’s behalf. Only time will tell…

H.W.

Extra Letter:

Letter the

From Mrs. Isabella Knightley to Mrs. Woodhouse

Southend-on-Sea, Essex

My dear mother

I have just sent noticed to Papa that I will not be visiting Hartfield over the break. I know he will be quite upset, but I cannot bear to visit the estate right now. I have come to the notion that, perhaps it is not remembering, but forgetting, that allows us to grieve. Forgetting allows for the distance necessary for healing and healthy reflection. Therefore, I relish in forgetting Hartfield. Forgetting has given me the freedom to act on my own accord; to let go of my past and focus on my present. However, that is not to say that I have been unscathed. Now that I, too, am a mother, I fear death more than ever before. It is absolutely wretched to live without the instruction and care of a mother, so I will do my all to ensure such an event will not burden the lives of my own children. Which is another reason that delaying any visit to Hartfield is beneficial, I have access to the most accomplished individuals in the city; especially the kindness of a Mr. Wingfield. He provides such wonderful and detailed insight into the health and well-being of the whole family; even garnering the praises of John. I can only hope that dear Father finds such excellent advice in Mr. Perry. I assume that I will be able to make judge of that myself soon enough. However, now is not the time to worry about those at Hartfield, I must focus on the needs of my family first. Southend-on-Sea is such a delightful place, if only you could have visited.

I.K.