

### Task 05: A passionate correspondence

In December 1787, the poet Robert Burns, now being lionized in Edinburgh, began writing a series of passionate letters to a female admirer, Agnes, or 'Nancy,' McElhose, a married woman with poetic aspirations. In the correspondence, they referred to themselves as 'Sylvander' (Burns) and 'Clarinda' (McElhose). At the height of this 'textual affair', they wrote several times daily.

A letter from each of the correspondents is given below. Further letters are available on several websites, including <http://burnsletters.wordpress.com/>

**TASK: Choose ONE of the letters below and write a response to it (c. 200 words) in the character of either 'Sylvander' or 'Clarinda', as appropriate.**

1. *Clarinda to Sylvander*

Thursday Eve. Jan 10<sup>th</sup>

I could not see you, Sylvander, though I had twice traversed the Square. I'm persuaded you saw me not neither. I met the young lady I meant to call for first; and returned to seek another acquaintance, but found her moved. All the time, my eye soared to poetic heights, alias garrets, but not a glimpse of you could I obtain!

You surely was within the glass, at least. I returned, finding my intrinsic dignity a good deal hurt, as I missed my friend. Perhaps I shall see you again next week: say how high you are.

Thanks for your inquiry about my child ; his complaints are of a tedious kind, and require patience and resignation. Religion has taught me both. By nature I inherit as little of them as a certain harum-scarum friend of mine. In what respects has Clarinda "converted you"? Tell me. It were an arduous task indeed.

Your "ravings" last night, and your ambiguous remarks upon them I cannot, perhaps ought not, to comprehend. I am your friend, Sylvander : take care lest virtue demand even friendship as a sacrifice. You need not curse the tie of human laws; since what is the happiness Clarinda would derive from being loosed? At present, she enjoys the hope of having her children provided for. In the other case, she is left, indeed, at liberty, but half dependent on the bounty of a friend, kind in substantiate, but having no feelings of romance<sup>i</sup> : and who are the generous, the disinterested, who would risk the world's "dread laugh" to protect her and her little ones?

Perhaps a Sylvander-like son of whim and fancy might, in a sudden fit of romance: but would not ruin be the consequence? Perhaps one of the former . . . yet if he was not dearer to her than all the world such are still her romantic ideas she could not be his.

You see, Sylvander, you have no cause to regret my bondage. The above is a true picture. Have I not reason to rejoice that I have it not in my power to dispose of myself? "I commit myself into thy hands, thou Supreme Disposer of all events! do with me as seemeth to thee good."

Who is this one male friend? I know your third female. Ah, Sylvander! many "that are first shall be last," and vice versa! I am proud of being compared to Miss Chalmers : I have heard how amiable she is. She cannot be more so than Miss Nimmo: why do ye not register her also? She is warmly your friend; surely you are incapable of ingratitude. She has almost wept to me at mentioning your intimacy with a certain famous or infamous man in town. Do you think Clarinda could anger you just now? I composed lines addressed to you some time ago, containing a hint upon the occasion. I had not courage to send them then: if you say you'll not be angry, I will yet.

I know not how 'tis, but I felt an irresistible impulse to write you the moment I read yours. I have a design in it. Part of your interest in me is owing to mere novelty. You'll be tired of my correspondence ere you leave town, and will never fash to write me from the country. I forgive you in a "state of celibacy." Sylvander, I wish I saw you happily married: you are so formed, you cannot be happy without a tender attachment. Heaven direct you!

When you see Bishop Geddes, ask him if he remembers a lady at Mrs. Kemp's, on a Sunday night, who listened to every word he uttered with a gaze of attention. I saw he observed me, and returned that glance of cordial warmth which assured me he was pleased with my delicate flattery. I wished that night he had been my father, that I might shelter me in his bosom.

You shall have this, as you desired, to-morrow; and, if possible none for four or five days. I say, if possible: for I really can't but write, as if I had nothing else to do. I admire your Epitaph ; but while I read it, my heart swells at the sad idea of its realisation. Did you ever read Sancho's Letters? they would hit your taste. My next will be on my favourite theme religion.

Farewell, Sylvander! Be wise, be prudent, and be happy.

CLARINDA.

Let your next be sent in the morning. If you were well, I would ask you to meet me tomorrow, at twelve o'clock. I go down in the Leith fly, with poor Willie : what a pleasant chat we might have! But I fancy 'tis impossible.

Adieu !

## 2. *Sylvander to Clarinda*

Tuesday Evening, Jan. 15.

That you have faults, my Clarinda, I never doubted; but I knew not where they existed, and Saturday night made me more in the dark than ever. O Clarinda! why will you wound my soul, by hinting that last night must have lessened my opinion of you? True, I was "behind the scenes with you;" but what did I see? A bosom glowing with honour and benevolence; a mind ennobled by genius, informed and refined by education and reflection, and exalted by native religion, genuine as in the climes of heaven: a heart formed for all the glorious meltings of friendship, love, and pity. These I saw—I saw the noblest immortal soul creation ever showed me.

I looked long, my dear Clarinda, for your letter; and am vexed that you are complaining. I have not caught you so far wrong as in your idea, that the commerce you have with one friend hurts you, if you cannot tell every tittle of it to another. Why have so injurious a suspicion of a good God, Clarinda, as to think that Friendship and Love, on the sacred inviolate principles of Truth, Honour, and Religion! can be anything else than an object of His divine approbation.

I have mentioned in some of my former scrawls, Saturday evening next. Do allow me to wait on you that evening. Oh, my angel! how soon must we part! and when can we meet again! I look forward on the horrid interval with tearful eyes! What have I lost by not knowing you sooner. I fear, I fear my acquaintance with you is too short, to make that lasting impression on your heart I could wish.

SYLVANDER.

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<sup>i</sup> She is probably referring here to her cousin, Lord Craig.