

Selections from NDL collections

From the Kaleidoscope of Books (26) Expressing romance in words—the world of love letters

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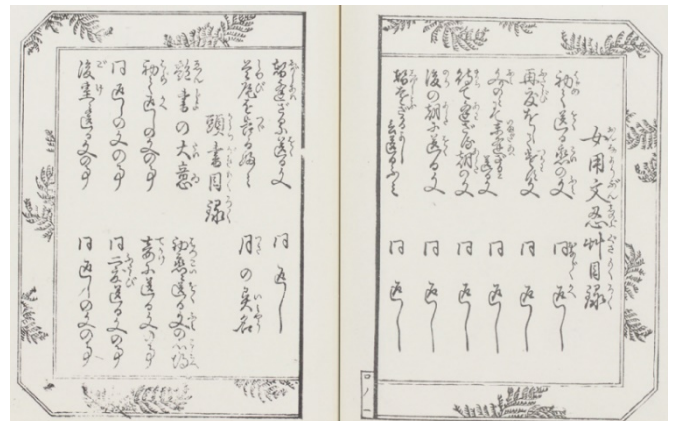
So, how about you? Have you ever written a love letter? The small digital exhibition *Expressing Romance in Words—The World of Love Letters* takes a look at the language of love and the world of love letters as seen in style guides to writing love letters and the culture of writing love letters in or after the Edo period.

We hope that you will enjoy this glimpse into the world of love letters whether you have ever written one yourself or not.

1. Love letters in the Edo period

1.1 A style guide for love letters!

First, let's look at these typical style guides for writing love letters from the Edo period. They contain examples of love letters as well as advice on writing them.



Onna youbun shinobugusa
Included in *Edo jidai josei bunko*
No. 32. Tokyo: Ozorasha, 1995.
NDL Call No.GB391-E89

1.1.1 Romantic suggestions for a variety of partners

This material was published at the end of the Edo period, and the author is unknown. There are examples of romantic correspondence for a variety of situations and instructions on writing a love letter as well as techniques for divining compatibility. The table of contents shows chapters on subjects such as how to write a first love letter, a love letter to someone you are unacquainted with, and even a discussion of the philosophy of love letters.

There are also suggestions based on the social station of the addressee, such as love letters to a mistress or love letters to a widow. There are suggestions as diverse as writing to a housemaid or even a nun.

The text provides a wide range of advice for correspondence, such as the following:

A woman should not reply overly soon to a first love letter from a man, since to do so would suggest she is prone to rash behavior.

Even when replying promptly, a woman should express hesitation by saying "I am quite ashamed when I think about what you must think of someone who would reply so soon."



Yuujo anmon

Choshoken, editor. Ogiya risuke et al, publisher, 1796. NDL Call No. 856-13

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

1.1.2 Love letters for courtesans

This is a style guide for writing love letters from courtesans working in exclusive houses of prostitution. The chapters cover topics such as writing to a repeat customer, to a regular customer, or to a regular customer who has not been seen for a while. The examples include expressions for entreating a customer to come for a visit. For example, since courtesans were required to draw in customers on particular days of the month, there are examples of love letters requesting a visit on a particular day. The text also contains advice on interacting with customers, such as the following axioms for dealing with repeat customers.

Too much hospitality is as bad as poor hospitality.

Moderation is key when interacting with customers. Saying farewell in the morning after spending the night together is an especially delicate matter. Your spoken farewell should impart considerable feeling. Relying on a hug to be the secret to a good farewell is mere laziness.



Nana Komachi Azuma fuzoku

Utagawa Kunisada, painter. Fujiokaya Keijirō, publisher. 1858.

included in *Kodai edoeshu* NDL Call No. 忍-88

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

* The courtesan sitting in the center is writing a letter. It may be addressed to a customer. Learning of the style guide for writing love letters *Yuujo anmon* makes us imagine that.

1.2 Classical literature as a model for love letters!?

The following work was a popular style guide for writing love letters during the Edo period. Unlike the previous two works, it includes references to *waka* poetry and other classical literature as well as well-known historical episodes from the Heian period.



Shikakenroshu

Misuyamataemon, publisher, 1698. NDL Call No. 847-12

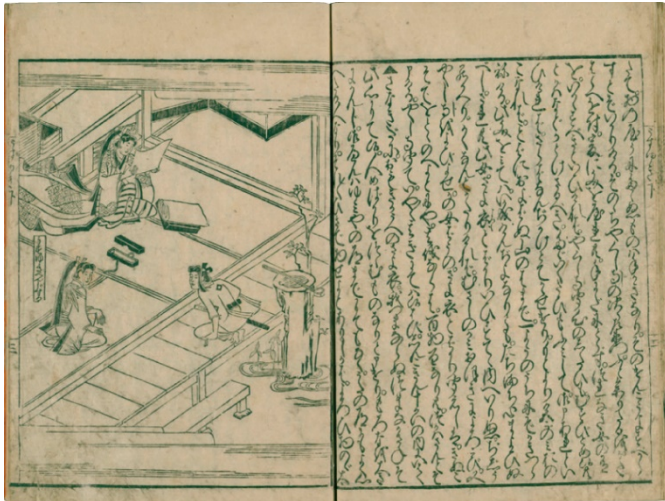
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

1.2.1 Learning from medieval and earlier literature

Shikakenroshu is illustrated and written in kana characters, which is an indication that it targeted women readers. It includes a variety of content on earlier techniques and conventions used in love letters, making reference to texts written for women, such as the medieval-era *niwa no oshie* and the Heian-era *Horikawain'enjoawase*, which was an anthology from a poetry contest. It enjoyed great popularity in its day as a practical manual of love letters.

Although it was intended to be a practical manual, the content was deeply rooted in classical literature. For example, expressions as well as chapter and character names from *Genji monogatari* are often referred to when discussing the techniques and practices of love letters. And the examples of love letters and poetry in *Shikakenroshu* are often based on such sources.

Horikawain'enjoawase is the record of a poetry contest hosted by Emperor Horikawa on May 2 and 7, 1102. It was thereafter used extensively in the education of young women from aristocratic families as a model for love letters. In addition to this poetry contest, *Shikakenroshu* also contains love letters and poetry that show the influence of *Genji monogatari*.



Usuyukimonogatari vol.2
Matue, publisher, 1665. NDL Call
No. 857-96
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

1.2.2 kana-zoshi filled with love letters

Kana-zoshi are story books written in kana during the early Edo period, and the story of this on unfolds around the exchange of love letters while quoting a variety of historical episodes and medieval poetry. It was very popular during the Edo period, and found practical use as

an example of love letters.

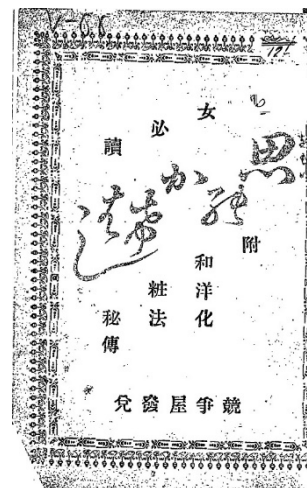
The main character is a man named Sonobenoemon, falls in love with a woman named Usuyuki, whom he meets at Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto. He repeatedly sends her love letters, and despite the fact that Usuyuki is married and refuses his advances, they eventually fall in love. The story ends with the sudden death of Usuyuki, after which Sonobenoemon enters the priesthood, only to die a short while later. The above image shows Usuyuki holding a love letter from Sonobenoemon in the back of a room.

2. Love letters in the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods

2.1 Love letter manuals in the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa periods—Unchanged feelings of love, changing words of love

Although called "love letters," romantic correspondence during the Edo period followed the stiffly formal conventions of the Japanese literary style call sorobun. A distinguishing characteristic of this style was to end sentences using the phrase "soro" in place of the colloquial "masu." By the end of the Meiji period, however, the influence of a movement to unify written Japanese with the spoken language had spread, and many people were writing personal correspondence in the vernacular. Naturally, the style of love letters changed accordingly.

2.1.1 "I am so deeply in love with you that I writhe in torment."



Danjo hitsudoku omoi no kakehashi (For Men and Women, Conveying Your Feelings). Karyu Suishi, editor. 1889. NDL Call No. 特 53-696 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

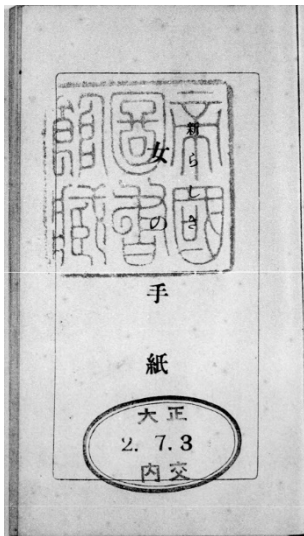
This book was published in 1889 and contains typical examples of correspondence between men and women. One of the examples, entitled "Letter to a beloved

woman," shows the writer's seriousness through use of the formal sorobun style of writing.

Since realizing I am enamored of you, the fire of passion has been burning in my heart. I am so deeply in love with you that I writhe in torment.

The latter half of this book includes instructions to women on how to apply makeup, with headings such as "How to make big eyes look smaller."

2.1.2 "I've fallen for you, haven't I?"



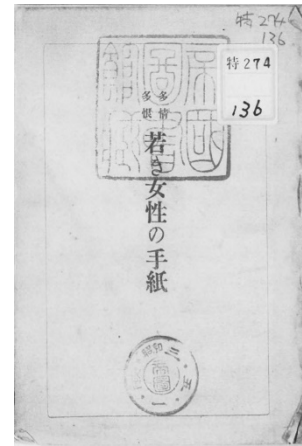
Atarashiki onna no tegami
(Letter Writing for Modern Women). Isono Yoshiko, editor.
1931. NDL Call No. 特 101-131
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

This book is an anthology letters written by young men and women during the Taisho period, although it is not entirely clear whether these letters were actually sent or not. This letter, entitled "From a young girl with bright eyes," airily conveys the writer's feelings in a plain colloquial style.

It was nice to see you the other day. I keep seeing your face...tee-hee!
I've fallen for you, haven't I? Oh my darling, if I lose my heart to you, what are you going to do? Will you grant my wish? Hmm?

This transition from sorobun to a colloquial style certainly made love letters more expressive.

2.1.3 "My face has turned scarlet."



Tajo takon wakaki josei no tegami
(Your Heart on Your Sleeve: Letter Writing for Young Women). Bungei Kenkyukai,
1928. NDL Call No. 特 274-136
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

This anthology of personal correspondence was published in 1928. In the following example, a woman openly expresses her joy and shyness while accepting a marriage proposal.

You don't know how happy I was to receive this surprising letter. Sometimes I wonder if it is just a dream.
(...)
I am so abashed and delighted that my heart is pounding, and my face has turned scarlet.

Reading these letters, it is easy to imagine that people in those days were not afraid to convey their feelings in letters.

2.2 Intimate correspondence between girls—the S word

The expression of intimate feelings in letters was not limited to between men and women. From the end of the Meiji period to the beginning of the Showa period, many girls formed close friendships that were referred to at the time as "S" relationships. Girls in these relationships would sometimes write to girls magazines about their relationships.

The following picture of two girls enjoying a walk together is by Takabatake Kasho, who drew numerous illustrations for girl magazines.



"Ochiba no kaerimiti" (Close Friends on the Way Home), Takabatake Kasho, illustrator. *Shojo kurabu* Vol.2, No.11. November, 1924. NDL Call No. Z32-411
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). (Limited access on the premises at the NDL)

2.2.1 The S word in girls magazines



Cover illustration to *Shojo sekai*, Vol. 13, No. 1. Shimizu Yoshio, illustrator. January, 1918. NDL Call No. Z32-B260
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). (Limited access on the premises at the NDL)

This colorful cover to the magazine *Shojo sekai* (Girl's World) is a typical of the girls magazines that were popular during the early 20th century.

The S word was "sister" and was used in reference to and intimate friendship between two girls that was neither just a casual friendship nor a truly romantic relationship. But fictional accounts of girls in S relationships were popular in these magazines, and there were girls who for whom such relationships were a part of their school life. One significant part of an S relationship was the exchange of intimate correspondence. What kind of letters did they send to each other?

2.2.2 Ardent letters from girl to girl



Shojo gaho (Girls Illustrated), Vol. 15, No. 3. March 1926. NDL Call No. Z32-551 * Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). (Limited access on the premises at the NDL)

You know nothing of the things I hold for you. My sighs, my monologues, my tears, my letters. But each and every one of them is here waiting for you.

(...)

My beloved O, why are your eyes so beautiful? Why do your eyes hold my heart captive? O, my heart hurts to bursting. What on earth should I do about these feelings?

A letter entitled "Things I wanted to tell you," contributed by a reader.

This letter was contributed to a readers' column called Letters of the Roses in the girls magazine *Shojo gaho*. A large number of letters written by girls to a specific partner were published in this column. Many were as passionate as this one, and could only be considered love letters from one girl to another.

No one knows if these girls were actually sending each other letters this passionate. But reading the letters that

appeared in these magazines gives us an idea of the special feelings of closeness these girls held for each other.

2.3 Higuchi Ichiyo—a writer of brilliant love letters

Higuchi Ichiyo was a writer who lived during the Meiji period and left behind a number of brilliant love letters. She wrote a number of works of literature over the course of her brief life and is now familiar as the portrait on the 5,000-yen bill in Japan. There are a number of interesting stories about her love letters.

Born in Tokyo in 1872, Higuchi Ichiyo entered the Haginoya poetry academy of Utako Nakajima as a teenager and began writing stories in 1891, after becoming a student of Nakarai Tosui. Not long thereafter, she died of tuberculosis in 1896.



Higuchi Ichiyo
Available in the [online gallery](#)
[Portraits of Modern Japanese](#)
[Historical Figures](#).

2.3.1 Ichiyo's style guide for letter writing

Ichiyo authored a style guide for writing letters in the sorobun style. In here style guide is an example of a letter that is addressed to a former high school classmate and expresses the writer's sorrow at having lost touch as well as a yearning to regain lost intimacy. Although the style guide contains no examples of love letters per se, this particular example has the ambience of a love letter, and some people have noted the similarity of the emotions expressed here to those in S relationships mentioned earlier. The opening sentence of this letter—"The other day, I caught a vague glimpse of you in the park in Ueno..."—is a beautifully literate example of Higuchi's talent.

●事ありて中絶えたる友のもとに
此は上野の公園にて御影のみに見参らせしかど御のほどは
りかね御あとも追ひ候はず空しくながめて立歸りしことかた堪
き思ひ日々に湧かへりよし御怒りにふれなんまでも御詫ひ申こ
ろみてど此文をばやうくしたしめ申候さりとて筆のかひなき上
ふ心の干がつも書得られ候はず紙をしまろめて肩を打なき候ひ
さもあらばあれ筆のじかに思しやらせ給ひて自づから御請れ
も給はらんや斯く隔たり参らせたる事のもとすを静かに思ひめぐ
せば知ならん遊ひめより月日を渡りて御心とけず門の柳に月か
む夜いざ合奏せん笑く来よの御請ひもなく増して春雨のつれく
際よまばやどての御音づれなごき絶て忘れし襟にはもてなさせ給



Tsuzoku shokanbun. Higuchi Ichiyo, editor. 1896. NDL Call No. 45-184
* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

2.3.2 Ichiyo's romance

When Ichiyo was 19 years old, she met and became infatuated with her writing instructor, Nakarai Tosui, who was 12 years her senior, and a number of her letters to him remain extant. About a year after they met, as rumors that they were romantically involved began to spread, she wrote a letter telling him that she could no longer continue their relationship. The letter is included in *Higuchi ichiyo zenshu* vol.4(3) (published by Chikumashobo, 1994. NDL Call No. KH134-2).

I have only ever thought of you as an older brother, to whom I could always turn for counsel. And yet because of these rumors, everyone, my family included, misinterprets our relationship. I can't tell you how disappointed I am with this situation.

Addressed to Nakarai Tosui, on July 8, 1892

You are to me a brother and a mentor. No matter what they say about you, I know in my heart it cannot be true...

Addressed to Nakarai Tosui, on August 10, 1892

Although she never directly discusses her feelings for Tosui, her description of how she respects him followed by her expression of chagrin at no longer being able to meet with him freely because of the rumors clearly conveys how she is trying to disguise the true depth of her feeling for him.

Despite there being almost no examples of historical love letters written in Japanese, there certainly is plenty of evidence showing the trials and tribulations of lovers past and how they managed to express themselves.

(Translated by Rie Watanabe and Moyu Yabe)