

Letter to His Son Thom

John Steinbeck, 1958

John Steinbeck's son Thom was 14 when he wrote to his father from boarding school—confessing that he felt he might be in love for the first time. This letter is his father's response.

November 10, 1958

Dear Thom,

We had your letter this morning. I will answer it from my point of view and of course Elaine will from hers.

First—if you are in love—that's a good thing—that's about the best thing that can happen to anyone. Don't let anyone make it small or light to you.

Second—There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you—of kindness and consideration and respect—not only the social respect of manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn't know you had.

You say this is not puppy love. If you feel so deeply—of course it isn't puppy love.

But I don't think you were asking me what you feel. You know that better than anyone. What you wanted me to help you with is what to do about it—and that I can tell you.

Glory in it for one thing and be very glad and grateful for it.

The object of love is the best and most beautiful. Try to live up to it.

If you love someone—there is no possible harm in saying so—only you must remember that some people are very shy and sometimes the saying must take that shyness into consideration.

Girls have a way of knowing or feeling what you feel, but they usually like to hear it also.

It sometimes happens that what you feel is not returned for one reason or another—but that does not make your feeling less valuable and good.

Lastly, I know your feeling because I have it and I am glad you have it.

We will be glad to meet Susan. She will be very welcome. But Elaine will make all such arrangements because that is her province and she will be very glad to. She knows about love too and maybe she can give you more help than I can.

And don't worry about losing. If it is right, it happens—The main thing is not to hurry. Nothing good gets away.

Parting thought: don't rush.

Love

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Note: Everybody has moments when their feelings are inflamed, and it's important that we recognize and observe them in ourselves and in others. Even when emotions are running high, a compassionate observer can step in to help facilitate mature conversation. Who better than John Steinbeck to advise a loved one in this regard? In this classroom exercise, students are asked to use the foundational structure of Steinbeck's letter—its focus on bringing an emotion to light, explaining the different manifestations of the emotion, describing what should be done about it, suggesting how it should be made apparent, and providing final reflective thoughts—to craft their own essays in the form of "My Advice About Your Strong Feeling."

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Kinds
of
love

What
to do
about
it