

# Ennobling motives

*Love Letter delivers mixed emotions*

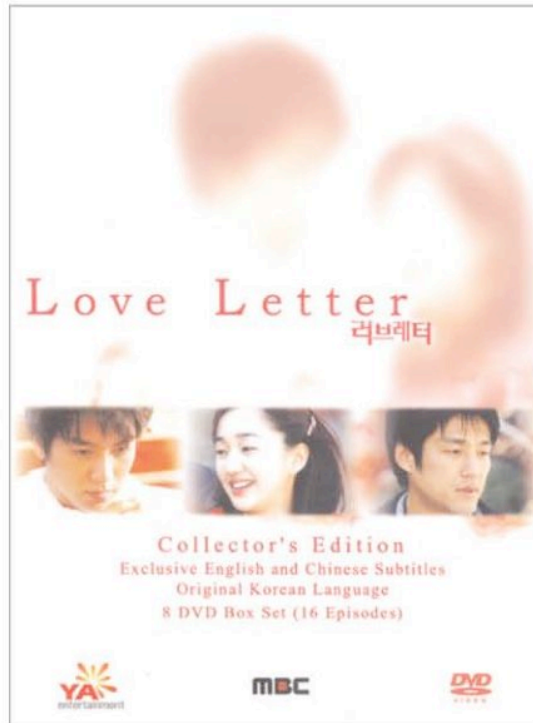
The genre of Korean drama loves the love triangle. Many multi-episode dramas are little more than nearly static explorations of the tension between a longstanding and secure, but passionless, romantic relationship and the struggle to leave it behind in favor of a love that is newer, truer, and deeper. Romantic love, as in the dramas of many other cultures as well, is usually portrayed as the ultimate in human fulfillment, and its thwarting a potential tragedy.

The 2003 MBC drama *Love Letter* has a love triangle at its core, too. But despite the title (which, incidentally, is the same in Korean, consisting of the transliterated loanwords “Lobeu Letteo”) and the literal presence of a love letter whose fate changes everything, the romantic love triangle that is ostensibly the point of the drama is far from the whole story.

God — and God’s will for the characters — plays a major role in their relationships and opens the triangle into a quadrilateral. As the drama progresses, other characters enter and further complicate the emotional geometry. In addressing these complications, *Love Letter* distinguishes itself as a rather more sophisticated than usual treatment of human values and various kinds of love: Maternal, fraternal, platonic, spiritual, and, yes, romantic. By the drama’s end, the paramount position of romantic love has received a thorough challenge, and our understanding of what type of love the main characters value most has been called into question.

We first meet the male lead, Andrea (Andrew), as a small boy. (Most of the characters call him by this Italian baptismal name throughout the drama, although his full Korean name is Woo-jin Lee; this fact has an explanation, but it is not central to the drama.) Andrea lives in semipoverty with his neglectful and exploitative aunt and his cousins, his mother having abandoned him early in life. The aunt takes advantage of him and makes him work from dawn to dusk.

Though he is in anguish, which is worsened by the fact that his aunt



*Love Letter*, an MBC drama series (2003)

has made him believe that his mother was a bad person, Andrea shows his fine character early on in his obedient resignation and apparent lack of bitterness. He takes comfort in a story that he retells to his cousin at bedtime, about two poor orphans who pray to God to protect them and deliver them from their misery. The orphans ask that if it is God’s will that they stay as they are, he sends down an old rope through the clouds, but if he will rescue them, that he send down a new rope that they can climb to Heaven. One day, God sends down a new rope, and the children climb together blissfully toward their new life in Heaven.

Andrea, who, like most everyone in the drama, is Roman Catholic, has faith that someday God will rescue him, too. His prayers are answered one day in the person of his uncle, the priest Father Peter, who comes to see him after a long absence overseas. Andrea’s aunt puts up a false front to show him that Andrea is being well cared for. Father Peter runs a school for orphans in the countryside, and he

asks Andrea if he would like to come to live with him.

Unfortunately, Andrea has been coached by his aunt in anticipation of this eventuality, and she has made him promise not to tell his uncle how he lives or that he wants to leave. She does not want to lose the benefit of his labor. Obediently, long-suffering little Andrea declines the lifeline. Father Peter reluctantly departs, and the household returns to habitually abusing Andrea. Some time passes, but, miraculously Father Peter returns unannounced one day. He catches the aunt in the act of shamefully mistreating the boy, berates her soundly, bundles him up, and carries him off to a new life. Andrea’s life changes dramatically for the better, and his faith in God’s goodness is redoubled.

Any drama fans who are viewers of the recent KBS drama *My Rosy Life* will be surprised to recognize Hyeon-ju Son, who played Soonie’s cruelly philandering husband in that series. Here he plays Father Peter, and the contrast is marvelous. As

the sad-faced priest, he seems to be fraught with some secret worry and is carrying a heavy emotional cross. Witness to the histories of the main characters (the “children”), he is privy to the secrets that have blighted their lives. He makes a strong and reliable, though undemonstrative, father figure.

Years go by and Andrea, played by Hyeon-jae Jo, grows into a handsome, persive, and gentle youth, in a sense an archetype of the beautiful young man who is beloved by the gods. His faith has turned into a half-formed vocation to become a priest like his uncle and benefactor. It is into this scene that Eun-ha Cho (played by Soo Ae), the eventual writer of the titular love letter, is brought by her mother’s close friend, Dr. Hyung-eun Im, after the death of both her parents.

Traumatized, embittered, Eun-ha at first rejects Andrea’s overtures of friendship, thinking him the sheltered product of a soft upbringing who can understand nothing of her pain. When she learns his true history however, her heart opens to him. The only two teenagers at the orphanage, they form a close bond that, in Eun-ha’s case at least, soon turns into love. Eun-ha gives her heart irrevocably to Andrea.

The character of Eun-ha is not merely a sweet, pleasant, and well-behaved feminine foil for Andrea, which is somewhat unusual for a K-drama heroine, at least it was at the time *Love Letter* was first broadcast, since there has since developed a fashion for more off-beat female leads. Though she is lovely-looking, the actress has a deep, smoky voice, heavy eyebrows, and a sad smile. She uses these to imbue the character of Eun-ha with a quality of lonely suffering that make her appear more romantically suited to some ennuied Frenchman than to the kind and innocent boy-man Andrea.

Yet it is also easy to understand Eun-ha’s quickly established passion for him. The two abandoned children fill each other’s need for closeness and trust in a way that kind-but-distant Father Peter cannot. Their bond is deep and multifaceted, an amalgam of fraternal

and romantic love, and they continue to cling to each other as their lives and circumstances evolve through the years.

Andrea’s friendship, once given, is given permanently, but the nature of his feelings for Eun-ha is not clear to anyone. This may be the writer’s design, but it is a flaw, as throughout the drama Andrea frustrates the audience, Eun-ha, and the other characters, who must guess how he really feels and what he will, or indeed should, do about her.

Andrea loves her, but he intends himself for the priesthood. One day, Eun-ha writes down her wish to belong to Andrea forever, but before she can tell him she loves him, he (preemptively?) informs her of his vocation. Like Father Peter and his two assistants at the orphanage, Sister Gemma and the housekeeper Maria, Eun-ha is troubled by this news. But she cannot bring herself to interfere with Andrea’s plans for his vocation, which he has also promised to God.

Nevertheless, Andrea seems to understand Eun-ha’s feelings for him as well as the threat they pose to the plans he has set out for himself. His gratitude to God and his plan to be a priest, in fact, imply to him the complete denial of earthly desires. It seems the complication of loving Eun-ha is something he is not prepared to embrace, and at times he selfishly disregards her pain as a means of tying him down to Earth when he wants to climb the symbolic rope to Heaven.

Thus begins the essential tension that drives the plot of *Love Letter*. Eun-ha loves Andrea and cannot give him up; Andrea loves Eun-ha and God, but he loves God slightly more devotedly. With things in this state, the two go off to college together and maintain an awkwardly platonic household.

Into this mix comes the third side of the triangle, a fellow student who, seemingly coincidentally, is also named Woo-jin. He is Woo-jin Jung, and he is played by the virile Jin-hee Ji, beloved by fans for his portrayal of the heroic *yangban* (scholar-official) Sir Min in the blockbuster drama *Dae*

*Jang-Gaum*. (aka "Jewel in the Palace," reviewed last issue). Woo-jin befriends Andrea and thereby incurs the fierce jealousy of Eun-ha, particularly because Andrea uses this new friendship to leverage some distance from Eun-ha. However, although no one else is aware of it, Woo-jin has also been in love with Eun-ha (although her identity was previously unknown to him) since glimpsing her several years before at the hospital where his father, a famous doctor, worked.

Another in the complex web of coincidences that join these three together is the fact that the woman who first brought Eun-ha to Father Peter's orphanage was his own stepmother, whom he grew up thinking was his birth mother. The revelation of her real identity (which happens early in the drama) is a source of great pain for Woo-jin, whose father is cold and demanding; the knowledge that his "mother" is not who he thought she was leaves him feeling confused, bitter, and betrayed. The awareness that Eun-ha clearly has room in her heart for Andrea alone

only increases his bitterness, but the three muddle through, conflict but still loyal friends.

Despite the complicated emotional landscape just described, this covers only the first couple of episodes of this 16-part drama. The last salient feature to mention before entering into true "spoiler" territory is an explanation of the title. But although this revelation is actually just a setup for the rest of the drama, some readers may still consider it an unwelcome spoiler, so be forewarned. Before Andrea goes off on a year's journey to Italy to pursue training for the priesthood, he finds the love letter Eun-ha has written him.

In return, and rather confusingly in spite of his declared intention of living the celibate life, he leaves her a final written message which he means for her to find in their shared living quarters after his departure. In it, he tells her that if during that year she wants him back, she has only to write him and he will return to her forever. Maddeningly, it is not Eun-ha but jealous Woo-jin who finds

the letter first; he reads it, keeps it, and never tells her about it. Eun-ha remains heartbroken, Andrea stays in Italy thinking that she does not want him anymore, and Woo-jin continues his difficult pursuit of Eun-ha.

Abandonment, both emotional and literal, and the desire for comfort and redemption from these wounds thus form the emotional heart of *Love Letter*. It is a deeply moving scenario, but at the same time the execution is frustrating. Besides the opaque and ambiguous nature of Andrea's feelings, the drama's writer, Sooyeon Oh, also fails to make clear how the audience is meant to feel about the various relationships. Are we to agree that the call to serve God must not be ignored, even at the cost of betraying one's love for a fellow human being? Must such a calling involve turning one's back on life? Do we agree that it is the right choice for Andrea? At several points Andrea must make and remake that choice, but the decision never seems conclusive or unconflicted. In addition, the fact that the so much

hinges on one twist of fate-Woo-jin's finding the letter before Eun-ha — seems too cruel to accept.

The drama also engages in another K-drama plot staple, the secret problem of a character who feels compelled to leave everyone else out and go it alone, even though it means hurting loved ones through the misguided intention of not complicating their lives. This occasions a long and boggy passage wherein the other characters operate with incomplete knowledge, blaming and misunderstanding one another.

Such self-sacrifice feels unnecessary, and though a Korean audience might take such dramatic nobility in stride, it may be difficult for Americans to understand why anyone would think one's closest friends and family would rather be lied to than know about one's problems and possibly help.

Further, this secret crisis ultimately brings about yet another in a long line of ambiguous K-drama endings. Despite the efforts of this drama to convince the audience

that spiritual love can be just as fulfilling as romantic love, inevitably it will seem to much of the audience, this reviewer included, that the former is a weak substitute for the latter.

It is not even clear that the drama's characters make their peace with the plot's resolution. And worse, it is not evident at the end of the drama what has really occurred — has one kind of love finally surrendered to the other, or will the tension continue eternally?

All in all, *Love Letter* is a fine and unusual offering, with very respectable and affecting performances. Soo Ae and Ji Jin-hee are standouts, perhaps because their darker characters give them more to work with. Hyeon-jae Jo as Andrea hits many of the right notes, although he could perhaps have done more to clarify Andrea's thoughts and motivations. The rural landscapes around the orphanage are beautiful and do much to enhance the feeling of refuge and, perhaps, to explain the promise of spiritual peace for those who seek it there. ●