

"I Love You"

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Some words and ideas are almost impossible to define. In this paragraph, however, Robert Solomon shows that a definition can express a great deal about a phrase that has no conclusive, final meaning.

Words to Know

elusive hard to grasp

precipitate cause

"I love you" does not always have the same meaning, and this, too, should tell us something about the elusive nature of love. The first time it is always a surprise, an invasion, an aggressive act, but once said, "I love you" can only be repeated. It is unthinkable that it should not be said again, and again, and again. When one has not said it for a while, this may itself precipitate a crisis. ("Now why haven't you said that in all of these months!") On the other hand, "I love you" can also serve as a threat ("Don't push me on this; you might lose me"), emotional blackmail ("I've said it, now you have to respond in kind"), a warning ("It's only because I love you that I'm willing to put up with this"), an apology ("I could not possibly have meant what I have said to you, *to you* of all people"). It can be an instrument—more effective than the loudest noise—to interrupt a dull or painful conversation. It can be a cry, a plea, a verbal flag ("Pay attention to me!") or it can be an excuse ("It's only because I love you. . ."). It can be a disguise ("I love you," he whispered, looking awkwardly askance at the open door.). It can be an attack ("How can you do this to me?") or even an end ("So that's that. Wi(h regrets, good-bye."). If this single phrase has

so many meanings, how varied and variable must be the emotion.

Questions About the Reading

1. *What does the writer say happens the first time someone hears "I*

love you"? Why do you think this occurs?

2. Why must "I love you" be repeated once it has been said?

3. In what way can love be an excuse? Make up an ending for the example sentence.

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. Do you think the writer is qualified to tell you what "I love you" means? Why or why not?

2. Why does the writer give so many examples of what "I love you" can mean?

3. What mode of development is the writer using in the essay from which this paragraph is taken? How do you know?