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PREVIEW

**COMMODIFIED FAMILY:
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF GREETING CARD SENTIMENTS**

by

Diana L. Rehling

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**Major: Communication Studies & Theatre Arts
(Communication Studies)**

Under the Supervision of Professor Phyllis Japp

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Commodified Family: A Textual Analysis of Greeting Card

Sentiments

BY

Diana L. Rehling

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**COMMODIFIED FAMILY:
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF GREETING CARD SENTIMENTS**

Diana Lynn Rehling, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1998

Adviser: Phyllis Japp

The symbolic network of meaning surrounding “family” is interpreted and critically examined in a text constructed of greeting card sentiments produced by major manufacturers of greeting cards. Approached from a cultural studies perspective and adopting concepts from Kenneth Burke’s writing on language as symbolic action, greeting card sentiments sent between family members are examined as representations of “family” with wide circulation in the culture. Greeting cards present a construction of family that adopts “love” as the central and unifying symbol. The love that defines family in greeting cards also serves as the source of and inspiration for appropriately familial attitudes (i.e. gratitude, pride and recognition of family members’ “specialness”) and actions (i.e. supporting, caring, listening, understanding and advice-giving). The sentiments adopt the metaphor of family “ties and bonds” as a means of establishing identification among family members and as a defense against current conditions within the culture that threaten “family,” such as distance, stress and a shortage of time. Greeting cards also define family members as friends, minimize problems and use humor to protect “the

family.” Connected to and interacting with other cultural discourse about “the family,” the greeting card sentiments reflect and are integrated with cultural thinking about “family” and about what it means to live as a “family.” Because greeting cards are commercial products, their descriptions of family relationships are vague and general in order to appeal to multiple consumers and simultaneously unrelentingly warm, happy and joyful to be suitable for consumers’ use of the product as a gift on special occasions. Through the powerful relationship ritual of exchanging greeting cards these idealized notions of “family” act as vehicles for individuals to think about, understand and evaluate their actual family relationships. Critically examining and opening up the network of meaning surrounding “family” in greeting card sentiments allows members of the culture to consider the implications of this social construction of family and to imagine other possibilities.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Prologue

Meaning is produced whenever we express ourselves or make use of, consume or appropriate cultural "things," that is when we incorporate them in different ways into the everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value or significance (Stuart Hall, 1997a, p. 3).

Mary steps into a Hallmark gift shop and walks toward the racks displaying the greeting cards. The racks are located in the center of the store and take up nearly half of the store's floor space. As Mary begins her search she glances at the hundreds of cards lined up for consumers to peruse. She notes that each section is marked with signs indicating the occasion for which the greeting card is designed and, in many instances, the relationship between sender and recipient for which the card is appropriate. Here are the birthday cards for mother; there the wedding cards for sons and on the other side of the rack the anniversary cards for grandparents. Mary finds the portion of the display devoted to "birthday/sister" cards. She picks up and reads six or seven, smiling as she reads some, quickly returning others to the rack, holding several in her hand as possibilities. Finally she selects one, checks the price encoded on the back and takes it to the store counter. "Did you find everything you were looking for?" the sales clerk asks. "I found the perfect card," she responds. "My sister will love it." "That will be \$4.11," says the clerk.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Hearts full of memories,

Closeness and caring,

Warmth and affection,

Good times and sharing,

Laughter and pride,

Contentment and love...

That's what a family is made of."

(Hallmark)

Family. Politicians attempt to rally support by aligning themselves with the "family," religious leaders decry the decline of the "family" and call for a return to "family" values, and social reformers promote programs and practices for rebuilding and revitalizing the "family." Within the cultural discourse the term "family" appears in a variety of contexts, from "Family" Circle, a magazine marketed to homemakers, to "Family" Ties, a television situation comedy; from "family-friendly" corporate policies to family therapists who talk about "family" stress and frantic "family" syndrome. Politicians label tax policies "about families" (Dole, 1996), retail establishments are referred to as "family" businesses, eating establishments are advertised as "family" restaurants and movies and vacation spots are promoted as "family" entertainment. Moreover, individuals within the culture, such as the woman, Mary, introduced in the prologue, struggle day to day to meet "family" responsibilities and duties and to care for "family" relationships. They attempt to find "family" time, to build a sense of "family" and to nurture "family" bonds.

In this dissertation I am studying the discourse surrounding the "family" and "family" relationships within the United States today, focusing on greeting cards as the primary site for analysis. In my analysis, I focus particularly upon the language used in greeting cards to describe families, their relationships and communication, the commonly occurring images and recurring themes in greeting card sentiments about "family," as well as the contradictions, tensions and omissions in the picture of "family" that emerges from this widely embraced form of communication. I also examine connections between the networks of meaning surrounding "family" in greeting cards and the larger cultural discourses. Exploring these connections will help contextualize and situate the greeting card images of "family" and highlight the relatedness of this discourse to the larger culture. Put more succinctly, for my dissertation I examine "family" in greeting cards as one part of a larger discursive field in the culture.

I begin by establishing the general orientation for the project in order to describe the logic underlying the dissertation. In Chapter One I also provide a general outline of the dissertation and address the usefulness of the project. In Chapter Two I review literature that focuses upon greeting cards, including literature that addresses the history and current status of greeting cards, as well as the scholarly research which focuses upon greeting cards. I also review literature which addresses our culture as a consumer culture in order to provide a context for understanding greeting cards and their sentiments as part of our commodity culture and, more specifically, as a form of commodified interpersonal sentiment. The last body of literature which I survey in Chapter Two focuses upon family, in order to provide a social, historical and discursive context for considering "greeting card families." In the third chapter I address the specific theoretical and methodological approach adopted for this project. In Chapters Four and Five I discuss the results of my analysis. While Chapter Four focuses particularly upon aspects of the text that describe the affection, attitudes and actions

prescribed for “families” in greeting cards, in Chapter Five I discuss the rhetorical strategies the greeting cards provide for coping as “a family.” Finally, in Chapter Six, I consider the text I have constructed for analysis within its cultural context and examine the text’s connections to other cultural texts. In Chapter Six I also address the implications of the analysis I have conducted, discuss the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further research.

The Nature of Family

Across time and across cultures the family has been one of the most fundamental and significant organizing structures in societies (Le'vi-Strauss, 1996). Sociologists and family historians confirm that throughout the history of humankind males and females have mated and born and nurtured children within the context of biological ties--within families. Yet, to use the term “family” is, as suggested above, to evoke more than mere biological relationships. To consider the term family as simply designating bloodline relationship is to render such phrases as “family-friendly” and “family entertainment” non-sensical.

In attempt to understand today's “family,” demographic changes among families in the United States have been well documented--from recent increases in the number of single-parent and blended families (Varenne, 1996) to consistently smaller households (Popenoe, 1990). Sociologists have also noted shifts in the functioning of families. For example, while most families continue to provide care and educational guidance to children, recent functional changes in the family have largely reduced responsibilities for care of the elderly and have decreased parental involvement in children's religious training (Varenne, 1996). Yet, to view “family” as a demographic unit or as a social unit of adults and children which performs functions required within society lends little understanding to the much disputed notion of “family values” or the widely discussed “crisis in the family.” The positive aura surrounding the “family” and the emotionally

charged attitudes so often attached to it in discourse are inexplicable by simply considering the physical referents or social functions of the "family."

How then are we to understand "family" in contemporary American discourse? To begin to understand the uses, values, and complexities of the term requires abandoning what I.A. Richards (1936) refers to as "the superstition of simple meaning:" "the view that words just have their meaning--that what discourse does is to be explained as a composition of these meanings--as a wall can be represented as a composition of its bricks" (p. 9). To begin to understand "family" we must move beyond simply considering to what "family" refers and move to examining how and where it means. Elshtain (1990) argues that in thinking about notions of family in contemporary United States, we have failed to consider the meanings surrounding family that operate within people's lives. She argues that we need "to see the family as a whole, on its own terms: first as a set of powerful social relations with their own vitality and meaning to participants; and second, as one dimension of a wider community conceived not as a functionalist term but as a normative ideal of social and political life" (p. 259).

"Family" as a Rhetorical and Ideological Construct

One way we can gain insight into today's "family" and the issues swirling around it is by viewing it from a rhetorical perspective. For example, McGee's (1980) concept of the ideograph can provide insight into the power of "family" as a normative ideal within a society, one that simultaneously provides stability and yet remains ambiguous. As an ideograph an ordinary language term represents "collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and beliefs which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or anti-social and guides behavior and beliefs into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable" (p. 15). Furthermore, an ideograph's significance lies in its history as a term that influences and textures the "reality" of the individuals subscribing

to it. Viewed as an ideograph, "family" can be seen as providing guidance for socially desirable behaviors and attitudes in highly general and ambiguous terms, helping create the very reality it appears to name, and providing a point of unity around which members can be rallied.

"Family" appears to have, in many ways, reached the status of what Weaver (1953) refers to as a "god term," a term that has about it an unremitting positive feeling. Weaver suggests that "when a term is so sacrosanct that the material goods of this life must be mysteriously rendered up for it, then we feel justified in saying that it is in some sense ultimate" (p. 214). Whether protection of "family" serves as part of a rallying cry to war or is evoked to sell life insurance or promote tax policies, "family" appears to be held as a primary good within the culture, often aligned with God, America and duty.

Communication scholars working from a rhetorical perspective have established a tradition of examining "ideographs" or "god-terms" as powerful rhetorical symbols within the culture. For example, Condit and Lucaites (1993) consider the rhetorical power and uses of "equality" as an ideograph within discourse on racial issues and Lucaites and Charland (1989) examine the legacy of "liberty" as a cultural ideograph.¹

God terms and ideographs, however, do not stand alone and separate within the discourse of a community or culture. They exist as part of a larger meaning system—an ideology. For Althusser (1969) an ideology can be seen as "a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts)" (p. 231). Parry-Giles (1995) argues that ideographs can be seen as forming the building blocks of a community or culture's ideology. By examining specific campaigns and/or instances of discourse rhetoricians have explored the roles and functionings of ideographs within a society's larger meaning system or ideology.²

Ideology in Everyday Practices

Most rhetorical studies focusing upon ideographs, including those studies mentioned above, examine ideographs and ideology in public, political rhetoric, but ideology, with its building-block ideographs, is not restricted to the "public" realm nor is it simply a body of intertwined ideas. Ideology is also encountered in the practices of everyday life and is experienced in rituals and customs that bind the members to the social order. "In ideology men (sic)...express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence..." (Althusser, 1969, p. 216). And in the process of the lived relationship members come to view that which is ideological as something which is natural. From such a perspective, "family" is not only part of a system of related ideas, images and myths, but is lived as a real and "natural" relationship and is connected to other ideas, images and myths that are also lived as real and "natural."

To speak of ideology is not necessarily to suggest a system of ideas and meanings that are unchanging or unchallenged. From a neo-Gramscian hegemonic perspective³, the texts and practices of a culture move within a "compromise equilibrium"--a process of moving between resistance and incorporation of concepts, ideas and images that challenge the dominant ideology (Gramsci, 1971, p. 57). Popular culture can be seen as part of the terrain of ideological struggle:

It (popular culture) consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional culture, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which--in different particular types of popular culture--dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are "mixed" in different permutations (Bennett, 1986, pp. xv- xvi).

To consider ideological values and elements and the struggle for dominance requires

examination of a particular site, text or practice within which the symbolic construction of interest, such as family, is enacted. And although greeting cards as a site will receive further treatment below, it is worth noting at this point that sending and receiving greeting cards is an aspect of everyday life, a part of popular culture and an uncritiqued behavior that appropriates and enacts the discourses and ideology of "family" operating within the culture. Within this enactment are many of the images, expectations and values that make up our cultural visions of "family." Furthermore, buying, sending and receiving greeting cards which embody the assumptions, norms and ideals of "family" are tacit acknowledgment that our images of "family" are inextricably entwined with our commodity culture.

Focusing on the Symbolic

Examining "family" within greeting cards means focusing upon the process of symbolizing. Foss, Foss and Trapp (1991) suggest that "when we examine the process of symbolism, we are taking a rhetorical perspective" (p. 17). Foss (1989) further suggests that from such a perspective several benefits can arise: a clearer understanding of particular symbols and how they operate and the discovery through that interpretation of suggestions about symbolic processes in general. To interpret specific enactments of family in a particular situation can provide insight into how a biological relationship such as that of parents and offspring has become the foundation for a powerful symbolic construction that can appear natural and yet change and adapt, be ambiguous and yet provide guidance and direction for behavior, and provide a rallying point for members of the culture while simultaneously serving as a site for struggle and contest with competing systems of values and interests. Undertaking such an interpretation can bring to the fore consideration of such issues as the values, images and myths that are evoked with "family" and which may help provide stability to the symbolic construction; how these concepts are or can be translated into lived experience; the

cultural terms that stand in contrast to "family," as well as other ideographs or god terms with which "family" is consistently connected or with which it is competing; points of ambiguity and elasticity present in "family" that facilitate compromise and accommodation; the rituals of "family" that connect it to the larger social order, as well as the aspects of "family" that appear most contested and challenged.

A critical perspective allows us to not only better understand the workings of a particular symbolic construction such as "family" and symbolizing processes generally, but it further allows us to consider the implications of particular symbolic networks and what interests are being served, or not served, by them. From such a position we may assess the symbolic discourse and the entwined "taken-for-granted" universe of daily activity. Such an assessment can lead to possibilities for reconsideration, modification and change (Habermas, 1984).

A critic can best view a symbolic construction such as "family" from within a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the process of creating, modifying and enacting meanings, a perspective that allows for ambiguity, conflict and dissonance within the configuration of images, values and norms linked to a symbol. For this project I have adopted a cultural studies perspective as the guiding theoretical orientation. A cultural studies perspective attends to the multiple sites of meaning production within a culture and encourages the critic to view an artifact or text from multiple positions, while remaining mindful of the constant circulation of meaning within the culture. Two sites of meaning production identified by cultural studies scholars, such as Stuart Hall, provide particularly useful starting points for considering a symbolic construction such as "family." The two sites, representation and identity, are related sites of meaning production that focus upon the construction of meaning within an artifact or text and that call our attention to the discursive work involved in binding and marking symbolic boundaries.

In addition to embracing a cultural studies perspective as a general orientation for the project, I also call upon the symbolic action perspective, particularly that of Kenneth Burke. Burke's thinking is not only compatible generally with a cultural studies orientation, but is particularly well suited as a theoretical perspective for interpreting the symbolic construction of family as it is enacted within a particular site. Burke's symbolic action perspective provides a critic with specific and tangible ways of thinking about the processes by which meaning is constructed and identifications are forged.

As Gusfield (1989) suggests, basic to Burke's perspective is "an understanding of language as a form of action" (p. 30). He goes on to further outline the perspective:

The assertion here is that modes of symbolizing experience are a central part of human behavior. Symbolic representations constitute the ways in which experience is made possible and different forms of symbolic usage create different experiences. Action responds to meanings of situations and those meanings are reflections of the language frame we use (p. 30).

Japp (1990) states that "His (Burke's) critical program, then, is aimed at understanding how material conditions are defined and addressed attitudinally in and through the symbolic forms that determine meaning and delimits appropriate action" (p. 3). In Burke's (1973) phrase the symbolic forms provide "equipment for living." He argues that "the names for typical recurrent social situations are not developed out of 'disinterested curiosity,' but because the names imply a command (what to expect, what to look out for)" (p. 294). As suggested above, such a perspective not only emphasizes the language used to create the reality out of which we act, but also encourages us as critics to consider the omissions. Burke (1945) suggests that we "develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality" (p. 59). Examining not only the vocabulary employed, but also considering the omissions in the vocabulary should

enhance our understanding of what is not expected --the values, responsibilities and actions that fall outside the realm of the symbolic construction. Burke further encourages the critic to examine the links between symbolic networks and societal situations and conditions. He suggests the reality constructed through and in language frameworks provides a society with "promise, admonitions, solace, vengeance, foretelling, instruction, charting" (1973, p. 296), a means for dealing with and making sense of the current circumstances. Such a perspective raises questions about the links and connections between current conditions and networks of meaning surrounding the symbolic construction--for what set of circumstances may the meanings serve as coping, charting or mapping strategies? Burke's perspective also encourages the critic to explore the connections between a given text constructed for examination and a range of cultural texts, as well as the links between these texts and other cultural myths and ideologies--the STORIES we tell one another (Burke, 1984, p. 384).

Greeting Cards as a Site for Analysis of "Family"

As suggested earlier, one site within the popular culture where a critic can examine the symbolic construction of "family" is within commercially produced and marketed greeting cards. A function of greeting cards is, as Papson (1986) suggests, to "maintain, reinforce and reestablish social, particularly familial relationships" {emphasis added} (p. 103). And in order to communicate about these relationships, greeting cards require recognizable images of the relationships, specifically of the "family." These images within greeting cards, then, become available to the critic to interpret in order to better understand the symbolic network surrounding "family" as it is enacted within one site in popular culture. The cards serve as a powerful site for examining the "family," not only as a site in which ideals, values and myths about family widely-circulated within the culture are available for interpretation, however, but as one which actively participates in the creation, negotiation, definition and practice of the lived relationships

between the individuals, even as they name it. As greeting cards are exchanged, displayed and saved as mementos, they can provide "equipment for living" as a "family."

Increasingly Americans are using greeting cards as a form of relationship communication, practice and creation. The exchange of greeting cards has become a powerful relationship ritual. In 1990, only eighty years after Joyce C. Hall founded Hallmark Greeting Cards (Hall Brothers until 1954), the United States Postal Service delivered 7.3 billion greeting cards ("When you care enough to zap the very best," 1992). Although hundreds of varieties of mass-printed Christmas, New Years and Valentines Day cards were available as early as 1880, mass-produced sentiments did not find an extensive market until this century (Voss, 1993). In 1996 greeting cards represented a retail market of 6.85 billion dollars annually (Greeting Card Association, 1997).

With the average American receiving roughly thirty-one cards each year, greeting cards appear to be widely integrated and accepted within American culture (Voss, 1993). Greeting cards are so much a part of the culture that they appear in museums and as the subject of museum exhibitions (MacAdams, 1991; Reif, 1995). And, as Regev (1994) suggests, an artifact's appearance in museums is one indicator of its acceptance and significance within a culture. Greeting cards have also become a passion for some collectors—additional support for the greeting cards as a meaningful cultural artifact (Rosenkrantz, 1989). A recent book by Ellen Sterns (1988), The Very Best from Hallmark: Greeting Cards through the Years, underscores not only the prevalence of greeting cards in American culture, but also highlights "how much those very run-of-the-mill commercial cards can show us about the times, attitudes and traditions" (Rosenkrantz, 1989, p. 22).

Some scholars have recognized the potential of greeting cards as a site for

examining cultural attitudes, including attitudes toward aging (Demos & Jacke, 1981; Dillion & Jones, 1981), gender (Bridges, 1993; Murphy, 1994; Schrift, 1994), death (Huyck & Duschon, 1986; Wood & Delisle, 1978), drinking (Finn, 1980) and body image (Schrift, 1994). Murphy (1994), in reviewing the research, concludes that generally the authors of these studies argue that "the words and images in these cards both reflect and reinforce widely-held social values regarding their respective topics" (p. 26).

Such findings are not surprising, given that the acceptance and publication of a greeting card sentiment is based upon research greeting card companies do to understand and predict consumer response (Schwartz, 1993). The greeting card sentiments that make it to market from the large greeting card companies, such as Hallmark, American Greetings and Gibson, are designed and chosen based on product information services (information gathered about cards that have sold well), as well as on research conducted through focus groups, telephone surveys and panels conducted at shopping centers (Sterns, 1988). Both greeting card industry representatives (Clark, 1994; Voss, 1993) and greeting card writers and editors (Gephardt, 1992; Joewinski, 1990) recognize the necessity of the mass appeal necessary for a greeting card to be successful. Brian Wilson, a writer for Hallmark, describes his job as tapping into the commonalties among people (Joewinski, 1990). Sentiments that are published but do not sell well are soon pulled from the shelves of stores, while "good sellers" are often repackaged in slightly different forms (Sterns, 1988).

The sheer numbers of greeting cards bought, sold and sent, as well as the marketers' concern for mass appeal, suggest greeting cards may be a particularly rich text for examining widely-circulated beliefs and values associated with family and family relationships within the culture. Research done by other scholars underscore greeting cards' reflection and reinforcement of widespread attitudes and beliefs within the

society.

The Dissertation Project

For my dissertation project I have constructed a text of greeting card sentiments that focus upon the "family." I have then interpreted the constructed text from a critical perspective, relying particularly upon the works of Kenneth Burke.

Most research that has been conducted upon greeting cards has been done using content analysis, as will become more evident in the review of literature section. Merely conducting content analysis of the cards, however, which involves uncritically accepting the terms and categories of card providers does not provide much depth of insight. After all the contents of the cards are not "accidental," since as commercial products they are supported by market and product research done within the culture that provides guidelines for socially acceptable and economically profitable products. In order for the cards to serve as a barometer of social images and values, the critic must go beyond the surface, into the implied, the omitted, the conflicting. By adopting an interpretive/critical perspective, a scholar is able to attend to areas of ambiguity and elasticity, as well as to points of disagreement and to conflicting and omitted images, areas not addressed well through content analysis. In addition, noting connections between "family" and other cultural discourses and links between "family" and cultural myths and rituals can help understand and locate "family" within the larger meaning system of which it is a part. This can be best accomplished from a critical perspective. Furthermore, considering the text within the context of relevant social circumstances, such as the stressors commonly confronting contemporary families, allows the critic to consider the symbolic constructions as "equipment for living," as Burke suggests.

Greeting card sentiments could provide a site for examining symbolic constructions of various social relationships (e.g. friendship, marriage or dating relationships). They seem an especially appropriate site, however, for looking at images, beliefs, values and