

Writing Our Love Generic: Finding (Some) Value in Greeting Card Rhetoric

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Though intended to express sentiment felt by one person for another, greeting cards involve a third party—the greeting card writer. In this article, Benjamin Sutton begins by examining his own bias toward the greeting card genre and goes on to explore its conventions and expectations through both personal experience and analysis of critical essays on the genre.

It may seem melodramatic to say that it was a Thursday and raining, and what I needed most in the world was to grab a card from the local pharmacy on my walk home, so that when I finally did open the front door to my apartment, I was met with something other than disappointment. Nevertheless, it's true. It's true that it was a Thursday night after class, it was raining, and I had procrastinated in picking out a birthday gift, again, as is all too common in the run-and-gun lifestyle of most graduate students. My logic was that I would make up some sort of excuse about online shipping dates being off, referring to last year's Amazon Christmas debacle, and then swear off the postal service altogether—as long as I had a card in hand to prove that nothing was forgotten and the whole thing was entirely out of my control.

So out of the rain and into the store, past the chips and dip, the photo scanners, and the leftover Halloween candy I shouldn't buy but know that I am going to buy, I finally reach what must be the world's longest aisle of card-dom (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The card aisle at my local CVS.

I am sure you have been in one of these aisles before, as you encounter a card for literally every occasion, even occasions that are arguably not card-worthy. There are age-, religion-, and gender-specific cards for everything from birth to death to major and minor holidays. Arguably, a solid percentage of these cards are offensive in their interpretation of gender roles, while others are even more offensive in just how poorly they compose jokes. Some use famous comic strips on their covers in a sort of copy-and-paste job that couldn't have taken more than a few clicks and a run to the printer to produce. "You had a boy/girl," "You're really old," a bunny, a baseball cap full of kittens, a sad dog with a bow on its head wishes your family happy holidays in a way that only a sad dog with a bow on its head can.

At this point it's been almost half an hour. Dinner is surely getting cold, and I am having trouble not choosing the wrong card. The difficulty in this activity is not simply choosing the *wrong* card, but finding even one that is any kind of *right*. And that's just the outside of the cards. I open up a few, hoping to find something moderately acceptable, but what's inside the cards is somehow worse, if that's even possible. Inside, the true pinnacle of sentiment is found in the statements used to express the feeling of the occasion. To call it sentimental would be an understatement. "Wishing you love and happiness on your special day and all others!" "Hoping your birthday is full of love and

laughter!” Regardless of the occasion, the same rhetoric is echoed throughout. Maybe a handful of hedgehogs singing in the tune of the Chipmunks when you open the lid of a card would appease somebody, but I don’t know that person. Like anything else, these cards have a clearly defined audience—but I’m not part of it, and neither is anyone else I know.

I don’t give in, deciding instead to change aisles altogether. I buy a bottle of wine and a bag of kettle chips, but nevertheless spend the rest of my walk home—and the next few days, in fact—analyzing the absurdity of the entire greeting card genre. The whole ordeal really has me wondering, why are greeting cards so terrible? And who in the world is buying them? In 2013 alone, Hallmark—just one of several major players in the greeting card industry—made \$3.9 billion in revenue (Suddath 84). Clearly, not everyone shares my aversion to greeting card imagery and rhetoric. Despite the overwhelming shift toward digital communication, people are still buying and sending greeting cards. Maybe the problem isn’t with greeting cards after all, but with me?

To combat my lack of knowledge of the genre, I decide to approach the greeting card not at its level of sentimentality or consumerism, but academically. To begin, I scour our university library’s online databases to find a solid starting point by which to compare the genre to those more often understood as “literary” within academia. Searching Milner Library’s database for “greeting cards” results in 420,705 hits—even when I limit results to full text only. Even the slightly narrowed term “greeting card verse” lends 221,326 results. Apparently I’m not the only one with a scholarly interest in greeting cards.

Lack of Originality

I decide to begin my research with what I see as the biggest flaw of the greeting card genre: the unoriginality of greeting card imagery and verse. Maybe it’s because I’m pursuing a doctoral degree in creative writing, but this is one of the biggest strikes against the genre as far as I’m concerned. As it turns out, greeting card verse isn’t unoriginal because it can’t be original, but because it doesn’t want to be. That’s because a greeting card serves a very different purpose than a poem or short story. Originality and craftsmanship may be of utmost importance in creative work, but in the genre of greeting cards, the recipient matters most. As Frank D’Angelo explains in “The Rhetoric of Sentimental Greeting Card Verse,” the idea behind the language in greeting cards is not to “[call] attention to itself” or “[put] the emphasis on us as speakers or writers” (343). The focus is instead, as it should be, “on the

receiver of the message and on the occasion” (343). That’s not to say that the reader of a novel or play doesn’t matter at all, but the relationship between greeting card-writer and receiver is very different from the relationship between writer and reader of creative work. There’s an additional step when it comes to greeting cards—that is, the person buying the card (in this case, me). In most situations, the person buying a collection of poems or short stories will be the same person reading them, yet when I buy a greeting card for my wife, I am acting as mediator between her and the person who wrote the card. However, the ideas expressed in the card are supposed to come from me. In that case, maybe the card writer is acting as mediator between my wife and me? Whatever the case, the relationship between card writer and card recipient is not a direct one.

In most situations, passing off someone else’s work as your own is somewhere on the spectrum from unpalatable to criminal. As it turns out, the very quality that I find so distasteful is actually one of the strengths of the genre as far as its target customer is concerned. It is this lack of originality, achieved through pronoun choice as well as diction, that enables the average person to walk into any store and pick out a card for practically anyone in his or her life and go on to earn points for sending that card, despite having done little more than swipe a credit card and address an envelope. What is this phenomenon and how is it possible?

Universal Specificity

In the greeting card industry, the term “universal specificity” is used to describe this phenomenon. As defined in Emily West’s “Mass Producing the Personal,” Hallmark’s concept of universal specificity is both “super personal and broad simultaneously” (240). The logic behind universal specificity, as West explains it, is that, “If writers draw inspiration from the self and from their own experiences, then greeting card sentiments bear the stamp of their authentic self, according to the ideals of expressive individualism” (240). Though this is certainly, at least in part, Hallmark’s way of mediating some of the inherent awkwardness of the greeting card genre, I can also see how there might be some truth to it. After all, the people who write greeting card verse are indeed people, and their sorrow upon losing a parent or pride in a friend’s accomplishment is not unlike anyone else’s.

In many ways, this reminds me of lyric poetry, and when I sift through a stack of greeting cards lying around my apartment, I notice that—just like in lyric poetry—the second person pronoun *you* is by far the most common. *You* appears fifteen times in the five of them that are pictured in Figure 2. (The

image also includes two blank cards in which people actually composed their own messages; their use of *you* doesn't count.)



Figure 2: Greeting cards from my wedding.

D'Angelo's analysis of a much larger sample supports my findings. He points out that out of the sixty-five cards he analyzed, the personal pronoun *you* appeared 167 times, while *I*, by contrast, appeared 84 times. As D'Angelo explains, this is because "people who send greeting card messages want to put the emphasis on the receiver of the greeting, rather than on the sender" (342). And here's the point at which analysis of my own cards hits somewhat of a snag. Since the emphasis is on the receiver of the greeting (me or my wife), people who know us know that we're not really into sappy, flowery verse. The cards from my closest friends and family members are either blank or very brief with longer handwritten notes. For example, the front of the Hallmark¹ card from my brother and his wife (the second card from the left) simply reads, "Hand in Hand," while the inside elaborates, "It's a great way / to go through life." The Papyrus² card from my sister and her husband (the second card from the right) is even more brief, with a blank front and an interior reading, "Wishing you both much happiness / and joy in your life together." Luckily,

¹The line is *Expressions from Hallmark*, a line from which two of our cards come. We also have a *Connections from Hallmark*, a straight-up *Hallmark*, and a *Hallmark Mahogany* card.

²From what I can gather, Papyrus is actually not affiliated with Hallmark at all. The other non-affiliated card seems to be handmade, if not by the sender then by a human being at least.

my wife saved a card her great aunt gave her at a church bridal shower, so I do have at least one stereotypical greeting card to analyze. Retailing for \$3.99, it's from Hallmark's Mahogany line³ and is the third card from the left in the photo above. This card is by far the longest, and it contains the most instances of *you*; I did not count the instances of implied second person, of which there were many. Here's an excerpt, from the last six of the card's forty-one lines:

Be honest, be loyal, and be trusting.

Be friends as well as lovers.

And promise you will hold each other so close

that nothing in the world

can come between you.

Congratulations

So it doesn't actually rhyme and, in fact, doesn't even read like a poem, despite the name greeting card verse. Maybe it's the pearl finish, silver script, and glittery flowers that make it feel, well, flowery?

Though the verse above is certainly applicable to my marriage, I'm still unconvinced that the concept of universal specificity is anything other than slick marketing. West also acknowledges this, at least in part, explaining it as the greeting card industry's way of "redirect[ing] the potentially negative associations with 'mass,' commercial cultures into the positive association with universality" (244). Perhaps that's what I really don't like about them after all—not the lack of originality for originality's sake, but the attempt to express something fundamentally personal through something that, however heartfelt it seems on the surface, is ultimately mass produced.

Context

But then again, were my wine and potato chips not also mass produced? Maybe it wasn't the greeting cards' mass-produced nature after all, but the context in which I encountered the cards—the artificial lighting and flimsy display shelves. Seeing the cards en masse is a much different experience than receiving a single envelope in the mail or with a gift. D'Angelo seems to agree, comparing greeting card verse to "proverbs, maxims, quotations, and anecdotes" (337), and likening my experience at the drugstore to a compendium of quotations—in a word, decontextualized. As D'Angelo

³*Mahogany* is Hallmark's line marketed exclusively to African Americans. I'll talk a little more about greeting card companies' push for diversity in just a bit.

asserts, “When it is put on racks of cards in card shops, drug stores, and supermarkets, greeting card verse is decontextualized” (337).

If I had been able to find a card that I wasn’t offended by on a visceral level, the act of purchasing, signing, and handing it to my partner would have recontextualized it. In other words, as D’Angelo explains, “there is a dialogic relationship set up between the writer’s intention and the sender’s intention, between the writer’s words and the sender’s words” (337). Perhaps my lack of understanding of this dialogic relationship prevented me from seeing greeting cards as anything other than generic, mass-produced—and thus ultimately false—sentiment. At least, that may be part of it, but only part. Another, potentially larger, objection I feel has to do with the nature of the greeting card industry in general. Like many people, I’ve always held the suspicion that many of the holidays we celebrate were invented or somehow mangled by the greeting card industry (in cahoots with others, such as candy manufacturers, I’m sure) with the primary goal of convincing us to buy stuff we ultimately don’t need.

A Historical Perspective

I was pretty confident the research would side with me on this particular issue. After all, ways of celebrating have historically been incredibly personal and varied according to the occasion in question and the religious or cultural tradition. Yet greeting cards seem to be antithetical to that. “Designed to fit a wide range of rhetorical situations,” as D’Angelo points out, greeting card verse is equally appropriate for “general holidays such as Christmas, New Year’s, Thanksgiving, and Easter, special occasions such as Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, and Valentine’s Day, and christenings” (338). Greeting card manufacturers attempt to fit *every* holiday into the same five-by-seven-inch rectangle. Don’t celebrate Christmas? No problem, here’s a cartoon menorah! Two guys getting married? Here’s a pair of cartoon stuffed animal grooms! Don’t get me wrong—I couldn’t be happier that greeting card companies are embracing diversity. It’s not the diversity that bothers me, but the fact that it all seems a bit artificial, and ultimately little more than an attempt to wring money out of yet another group of people. As is to be expected, greeting card champion D’Angelo disagrees, choosing instead to see greeting card verse as part of, “a rich commonplace tradition that goes back to antiquity” (343). He goes on to assert:

As Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, and others have pointed out, formulaic modes of expression derive from oral practice. They are common expressions on standard subjects stored up in one’s head or in commonplace books for subsequent use. They were loosely strung together by the singer of tales to form narratives or by the rhetorician to frame arguments. (343)

As it turns out, what I see as a relatively recently contrived racket, D'Angelo interprets as a rich tradition of ceremonial discourse. Though they share similar surface characteristics, I'm not sure greeting cards and commonplace books share much in common when it comes to their function. While the former is meant to convey sentiment, the latter tended to be more practical in nature. Yes, commonplace books included poems, proverbs, and quotes, but they also included medical recipes, legal formulas, and weight and measurement references. As with universal specificity, I'm not sure I buy this comparison, but tomato, tomahto I guess.

In "Writing Mother's Day Cards at Hallmark: An Inside Look," Claire Suddath doesn't trace the roots of greeting cards quite *that* far back, pinning their origin instead on an art shop in London around 1846. She explains, however, that though Hallmark didn't exactly invent the greeting card, "its modern day form is almost exclusively the creation of [Hallmark founder] Joyce Hall." In 1910, eighteen-year-old Hall was traveling around Kansas City selling postcards out of shoeboxes—talk about humble beginnings. Within five years, he had switched to selling greeting cards, and after a fire destroyed his inventory, he saved up to buy a printing press to make the cards himself. Store owners sold cards from behind the counter until 1935, when Hallmark provided the freestanding display shelves we see today (Suddath 84).

And while the display shelves haven't changed much since 1935 (because, really, how many ways are there to go about displaying a series of pieces of folded paper?), greeting card verse itself has evolved quite a bit since Hall first began selling his cards. As D'Angelo explains, within the past few years cards for everything from divorce to a diet to belated graduation have hit the shelves. Patti Brickman, spokesperson for the Greeting Card Association, refers to these as "non-occasion" greeting cards (D'Angelo 338). Suddath asserts that, "Because Hallmark cards are designed to appeal to as many people as possible, their evolution is a window into America's cultural shifts" (85). Whereas the cards Hall sold in the early 1900s featured "grandiloquent, multistanza poems about friendship, thankfulness, or love," over time the messages got shorter and more prosey and conversational (85). Within the past few years, Hallmark cards have even come to feature curse words. As a writer from Hallmark's Shoebox line explained to Suddath, "You can say 'ass' in a card now! That changed my career!" (85). Something tells me if I had been able to find a crude greeting card, I might not have ended up in the wine aisle.

Conclusion

Ultimately, however, I think the wine and chips were a better choice, at least for me. Despite having a better understanding of the functional purpose of

generic verse and imagery, I'm still not sure I really buy Hallmark's notion of universal specificity or D'Angelo's claim that "it exemplifies beautifully an important kind of ceremonial discourse" (337). West comes closer to articulating the true source of my discomfort when it comes to greeting cards when she explains that the greeting card companies' tendency to use vague terms or animals to represent people "suggest that these companies want to reach all customers without having to make cards that reflect the diversity of society and complexity of human relationships" (238). It's this inability to express the true complexity of human relationships that I find so off-putting about greeting card verse. It's not that I see no value whatsoever in greeting card verse, but—despite their assertions of universality—I don't think I'm within their target market. Until they make a "You're my favorite person to get Chinese food and binge-watch *Supernatural* with" card, I'll probably keep getting my last-minute gifts from other areas of the drugstore—either that, or maybe I'll stop waiting until the last minute.

Works Cited

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