The Rhetoric of Sentimental Greeting Card Verse

I suspect that many people who buy sentimental greeting card verse have the same preconceived ideas about such verse that I had before I began a serious study of it a few years ago. To my mind, greeting card verse was a trite and trivial form of poetry, filled with flowery language, poetic diction, and figures of speech, appealing to emotions in excess of the occasion—artificial, affected, and insincere. To my surprise, however, I discovered that greeting card verse, although often written in meter and rhyme, is not poetry, nor is it intended to be, but a rhetorical composition, a message transmitted from one person to another. Although its rhymes and meters are frequently trite (this may account for its wholesale condemnation), the sentiments it expresses, although commonplace, are seldom trivial. It uses few figures of speech, little or no poetic diction, and almost no flowery language. Nor are its emotions in excess of the occasion. The sentiments and emotions it expresses are no different than those that you and I might express at a wedding, a graduation, an anniversary, or a birthday, or at Christmas, New Year's, or Easter—good luck, congratulations, I love you, I'm thinking of you, have a joyous holiday, and so forth. Finally, greeting card verse is neither artificial, affected, nor insincere, but straightforward, genuine, and sincere. In fact, it exemplifies beautifully an important kind of ceremonial discourse, and I can think of no better way of introducing writers to the ancient art of epideictic discourse than through a careful analysis and understanding of the rhetorical strategies used by writers of greeting card verse.

Paradoxically, greeting card verse is both universal and particular. The message of greeting card verse must be general enough to fit representative rhetorical situations (Quinn 22), yet particular enough to fit immediate occasions. Like proverbs, maxims, quotations, and anecdotes, when they are decontextualized and put into collections, greeting card verse is decontextualized when it is put on racks of cards in card shops, drug stores, and supermarkets. Under appropriate circumstances, however, the person who buys greeting card verse recontextualizes it, appropriates it to his or her own intention, and sends it to someone else as a personal message. As a result, 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. But as Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed out, do not all of the

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The diction of greeting card verse is simple. As one writer of greeting cards put it: "Most people speak very simply. And it's these people—the woman next door, and the man you met at church—who are going to buy these verses." Almost all of the words in the verse I examined were Anglo-Saxon, monosyllabic words. Since greeting card verse deals with everyday occasions and since the dominant appeal is emotional, one would expect the kind of language necessary to convey basic sentiments and simple, but sincere, emotions. Anglo-Saxon words found in greeting cards that deal with home and hearth and everyday things include man, woman, husband, wife, plans, life, day, night, spring, and winter. Anglo-Saxon words dealing with the emotions include love, cherish, share, express, feel, touch, and sigh.

The most frequently used noun in greeting card verse was the word day (22). Other commonly used words were life (15), time (15), and happiness (15). I expected the verb love to be the most frequently used verb. It appeared 32 times. The most frequently used verb, however, was some form of the verb be. The verb is appeared 46 times; the verb are 24 times; the verb am 10 times, and so forth. In retrospect, these figures seem reasonable because the verb be allows writers of greeting card verse the flexibility to express basic human sentiments by combining some form of the verb be with a predicate noun, an adjective, or an adverb, as in these examples:

Love is a special feeling that words alone can't express.
You are so special and so dear.
I am here when you need me.

The most commonly used personal pronoun was the pronoun you. It appeared 167 times. The word I appeared 84 times. Altogether, there were 295 pronouns. As I pointed out earlier, people who send greeting card messages want to put the emphasis on the receiver of the greeting, rather than on the sender. There are occasions, however, such as on anniversaries, when an I-to-you relationship seems more appropriate.

In examining conventional greeting card verse, I expected to find it filled with flowery language consisting of trite figures of speech. However, only 8 sentences out of the 117 sentences I examined contained figurative language. Most of these consisted of a single clause containing a simple metaphor: "Love is a quiet whisper that only two hearts can hear." One sentence contained two juxtaposed clauses, in the manner of imagist poetry, that expressed a simple sentiment: "Spring fills the world with beauty.... You fill my world with love." Most of the comparisons were literal comparisons, expressing love ("My love for you grows deeper as every day goes by").

If greeting card verse uses few figures of speech, then how does it get the reputation of being trivial and trite, flashy and flowery? Not only because it often uses trite rhymes and meters, but also because it uses a large number of commonplace expressions, prefabricated passages, stock phrases, and turns of phrase. To some critics, the use of commonplace expressions is a weakness. To me, this is its strength. Whether conscious of it or not, writers of greeting card verse are exploiting a rich commonplace tradition that goes back to antiquity. 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.

The writer of greeting card verse composes in a manner similar to that of the classical orator or the singer of tales—stringing together epithets, fixed sayings, stock phrases, standard parallelisms, and oppositions for use on any number of occasions. Some critics would label these prefabricated expressions clichés, or idioms, or frozen expressions. To me, they are more like the schemes of classical rhetoric or the schemata of contemporary cognitive psychology. It would simply be impossible to speak or write without them. They make for economy and ease of expression. And most importantly, they express simple, basic human emotions and everyday sentiments in a pleasing and conversational style. When we go to a wedding, a graduation, a birthday celebration, or a wake, the last thing we want to do is to be original, to use a kind of language that calls attention to itself, that puts the emphasis on us as speakers or writers, rather than more properly on the receiver of the message and on the occasion.

Commonplace expressions have a number of uses in conventional greeting card verse. One characteristic use is to lead into the verse itself. Here are a few examples of what I will call the "words fail me" (topos), taken from the opening lines of several sentimental greeting cards:

No words can describe how special you are.
No words can express how much you are loved.
Words alone can't express what you mean to me.

What words are there to say? The following are some examples of a greeting card topos that conveys the idea "we don’t always take the time to express how we feel about others".
two or more juxtaposed sentences which make a comparison, as in the following examples:

Every day I love you
more than I did the day before.
Spring fills the world with beauty . . .
You fill my world with love.

Although the pattern of arrangement of conventional greeting card verse is important, the rhetoric of greeting card verse succeeds more by the texture of its style, by the flow of its language, than by an extended organizational pattern. The most commonly used rhetorical sentence type is the parallel sentence, combined with anaphoric repetition, the repetition of words and groups of words at the beginning of a sequence of sentences:

I can't describe what love is, but
I see it in your eyes,
I hear it in your gentle voice,
your whispered words and sighs.

I can't describe what love is, but
I feel it in your touch,
in your warmth and understanding
that I need so very much.

In these two sentences, there is identical balance, parallelism, and repetition in the initial clauses of the succeeding lines (“I can’t describe what love is,” “I can’t describe what love is”) and anaphoric repetition and grammatical parallelism in the clauses that follow (“I see it in your eyes,” “I hear it in your gentle voice,” “I feel it in your touch”). The repetition and parallel structure reiterate the main idea (“I can’t describe what love is”), emphasize the parallel and contrasting idea (but I can recognize it), and reinforce the emotional appeal by their insistent syntactical structure, rhythm, and sound.

Another commonly used rhetorical sentence type in greeting card verse is the repeated-word sentence. In the following sentences, the same word is repeated at the end of successive phrases and clauses:

I’m thankful for bright times,
for carefree and light times,
for having you there.

I’m thankful for gentle times,
for warm sentimental times,
for knowing you care.

In these two sentences, the repetition of the word times, coming as it does at the end of the sequence of phrases, emphasizes the idea of time as memorable event and intensifies the emotional effect conveyed by the message.

Perhaps the most pervasive type of repeated-word sentence used in greeting card verse is the sentence in which a word or group of words is repeated anywhere within the sentence, as in the following example:

In quiet and thoughtful ways, in happy
and fun ways, all ways and always.
I love you.

In this sentence the word ways is repeated at the end of two successive phrases, picked up again at the beginning of the next phrase, and then repeated as part of the word always. Similarly, the root word all initially appears in the phrase “all ways” and is then repeated in a slightly different form in the homophonous word always. The movement is from the particular (“quiet and thoughtful ways,” “happy and fun ways”), to the general (“all ways”), to the hyperbolic (“always”).

A final frequently used rhetorical sentence type is the elliptical sentence. Omitting parts of the full grammatical structure of a sentence can be a means of achieving emphasis in a sentence. But a more characteristic use of ellipsis in greeting card verse is to avoid using the first person pronoun I, as in these examples:

Hoping that your birthday brings the things you like best.

Thinking of you on your birthday and wondering if you know how very often you cross my mind.

Eliminating the first person pronoun puts the emphasis more properly on the “you,” the receiver of the message, than on the sender, since greeting card verse is eminently audience-centered. The rhetorical effect would certainly be different if these lines were written as follows:

I am hoping that your birthday brings the things you like best.

I am thinking of you on your birthday and wondering if you know how very often you cross my mind.
words we use come to us already stamped with the intentions and meanings of others?

Greeting card verse is designed to fit a wide range of rhetorical situations, including 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 such everyday occasions as birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, graduations, and christenings (Hurt 11-12). Within the past few years, there has even emerged what Patti Brickman, the spokesperson for the Greeting Card Association, has called the "non-occasion" greeting card (Piper 2). Non-occasion greeting cards refer to situations and events such as domestic unrest, divorce, diet, humorous sympathy, and belated graduation that don't rate their own category.

Because greeting cards are designed for use as the occasion demands, they provide the starting point and the exigency for the writer's and the sender's intention. Greeting cards convey a large number of general intentions which are always tied to the occasion—to celebrate a holiday, a ceremony, or an event, to express praise or admiration for a person or for a person's accomplishments, to compliment, to congratulate, to honor, to comfort, to sympathize, to thank, and to communicate an affectionate concern or strong attachment to someone. Yet all of these intentions can be subsumed under the classical categories of praise and blame. Because greeting card verse is a subdivision of ceremonial discourse, it will praise a person for being virtuous and blame a person for being wicked or vicious. (More and more cards that blame persons and things are beginning to appear on the market.) It will enumerate the good or bad qualities belonging to a person or thing and aim to show what is beautiful and good or what is base and worthy of censure. In sum, greeting card verse, like other ceremonial discourse, is designed for the pleasure and edification of the audience.

Although greeting card verse superficially resembles poetry, unlike poetry it must contain a message. Without the message, it wouldn't be a greeting at all. Every card is built on a basic idea, based on a simple, everyday situation (Passet 20). On birthday cards the basic idea is a general wish for happiness. On anniversary cards the general idea is that the couple will continue to share many years of happiness together. Sympathy cards focus on loss, grief, and comfort. Easter card verse centers on religious themes or on springtime and rebirth. Verses that express love, affection, or friendship convey warm, tender, or friendly feelings and emotions.

Conventional greeting card verse generally consists of from four-to-eight lines of verse or prose (Hohman and Leary 111). One can, however, find verse of varying lengths, from two lines to twenty. Because conventional greeting card verse is generally short, it does not admit of much internal development. The dominant organizational pattern in the sixty-five cards that I have examined is an inductive pattern leading up to the punch line, as in the following example:

In quiet and thoughtful ways . . .
in happy and fun ways . . .
all ways and always . . .
I love you.

This verse consists of a single sentence, arranged in a periodic structure. The first three lines tell the manner in which the person sending the card loves the receiver of the card ("in quiet and thoughtful ways," "in happy and fun ways," "all ways and always"). The conclusion states the main idea. Although this verse consists of a single sentence, in verses consisting of several sentences, the pattern is similar. In fact, on many cards, sequences of sentences are punctuated as if they were a single sentence. So close is the relationship between sentence and sentence sequence in some cards that one is tempted to say the texture of style provides the organizational pattern for the whole verse. Here is another example of an inductive pattern:

A friend is the one who, just by a smile, can brighten your dreariest day.

A friend is the one whose words you can trust no matter what others may say.

A friend is the one who somehow can sense exactly what you're going through.

It's no wonder, then, that when I need a friend the one I turn to is you.

This verse consists of four sentences in eight lines, arranged in an inductive order. But it is the anaphoric repetition of clauses at the beginning of successive sentences ("A friend is the one who . . .") that is as much responsible for developing the main idea as is the inductive sequence. Another organizational pattern in greeting card verse is the use of parallel structure to express parallel ideas:

No words can describe
how special you are.

No words can express
how much you are loved.

In this verse, two simple ideas are expressed in balanced and parallel sentences: "you are special" and "you are loved."

A final organizational pattern found in greeting card verse is the comparison structure, consisting either of a single sentence arranged in successive lines or of
I may not put my love in words too often.
I may not always put in words the things that I feel about you.
I don't always take the time to tell you how much I love you.

Another characteristic use of commonplace expressions in greeting card verse is to tie together stretches of discourse into a metrical composition. I am listing below, in a fixed sequence, a series of commonplace expressions taken from different cards. I have arranged them in such a way that they could almost form a coherent verse of their own:

Your smile
your touch
you mean so much
I love you
more and more each day
you are very special to me
you’re wonderful to know
how meaningless my life would be without you
you fill my world with love
in your own special way

When I started to make a list of the stock phrases found in sentimental greeting card verse, I was surprised to discover how many were similar to the titles of the sentimental love songs of the 40s, 50s, and 60s: “Day by day,” “More and More,” “Once in a Lifetime,” “Someone Like You,” “Lucky in Love,” “More Than You Know,” “I Can’t Begin to Tell You.” I would suppose that the song stylists of today are working in the same tradition. There are many lines in greeting card verse that could easily have come from songs by Lionel Richie or Stevie Wonder or Kenny Rogers:

I can see it in your eyes.
I can feel it in your touch.
Today you were on my mind.
I only know I love you.

In this wealth of commonly shared expressions, it would be impossible to determine who used these expressions first. As Walter Ong might put it: “Everybody is quoting everybody else.” I would not be surprised to find similar kinds of thematic material in the love poetry of Petrarch and Dante or Spenser and Campion. Writers of greeting card verse, perhaps unfamiliar with the love sonnet tradition, would contend that these words and phrases are nothing more than the language people use in everyday conversations.

Despite my defense of the conventions of traditional, sentimental greeting card verse, it would be easy to find examples of banal, trite, and trivial greeting card verse on shelves in greeting card stores today. At its worse, greeting card verse lacks freshness, originality, and taste. At its best, however, greeting card verse expresses basic human emotions and sentiments in a simple, sincere, and conversational style. It is an excellent example of the ancient art of ceremonial discourse, an art "more honored in the breech than in the observance."

Works Cited

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