Deceptive Innocence:
Exploring the Symbolic Interpretation of Purity in Little Billy's Letters

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Background Information:

- Billy Geerhart wrote fan letters:
  - Richard Nixon, Mr. Rogers, Oprah Winfrey, Billy Graham, Johnny Cash, Charles Manson, and thousands more (Harness, 2010)
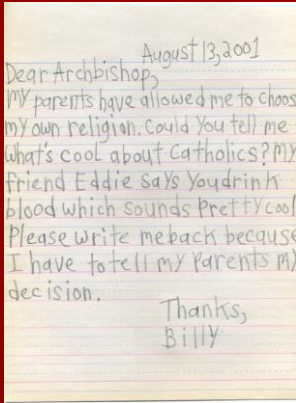

Figure 1
A letter from Billy to the Archbishop
Created by William Geerhart 2001

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Research Question

"How did the symbolic interpretation of innocence in Little Billy's letters influence the responses from famous individuals?"

Road Map

1. Literature review of Semiotics
2. Investigate artifact: apply semiotics to the patterns and themes in Little Billy's Letters
3. Draw conclusions
   1. It is easier to communicate with those who possess less power
   2. Innocence can be used as a tool for persuasion
4. Contribution to the discipline

Background Information

- William Geerhart: author
- 120 responses for "Little Billy's Letters: An Incorrigible Inner Child's Correspondence with the Famous, Infamous, and Just Plain Bewildered" (Geerhart, 2011)

Significance

- 2nd-best seller on Amazon (Amazon, 2011)
- Insights into the role of rhetoric in our society
- Understand how language is manipulated to force a response
- How individuals respond and trust those with perceived innocence

Literature Review

Original sources to support the research question

Semiotics

1. Language is a system of symbols

2. People develop interpretations of these symbols based on their habits of thought

3. People change their behavior based on their assumptive meaning of specific symbols

(Saussure, 1916, Lenninger, 2021)

Interpretation:
Patterns and Themes within Artifact

1. Geerhart (2011) used a system of symbols in his letters to illustrate adolescence

- Elementary school paper
- Big, irregular letters
- Variations in size
- Slants and uneven lines
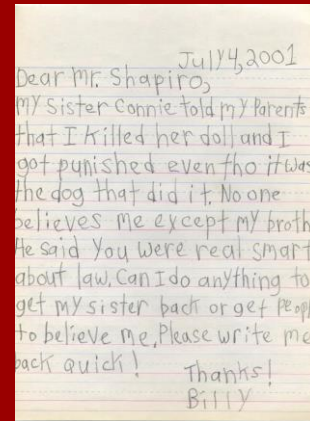- "Billy" instead of "William"
- Bad grammar

Figure 2
A letter from Billy to Mr. Shaprio
Created by William Geerhart 2001

Interpretation:
Patterns and Themes within Artifact

2. Individuals formed interpretations of these symbols based on their cognitive habits

- Individuals interpreted these symbols in Little Billy's Letters to be childlike (Geerhart, 2011)

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Interpretation:
Patterns and Themes within Artifact

3. Behavior changed due to their assumption of innocence

- They changed their behavior by responding to him in a more fun, whimsical way (Geerhart, 2011)

Implications

- People are willing to communicate with those who possess less power (Noguchi & Mong, 2019)

- The innocence of a child can be used as a tool for persuasion (May, 1998)

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Contributions to the Discipline

- Ongoing discourse in communication studies on the role of perceived power and innocence in rhetoric

Further Research

- Empirical research: Interview prominent individuals who responded to Geerhart and determine why they were inclined to write back.

Conclusion/ Overview

- Identified a specific research question
- Investigated Litte Billy's letters through the original work of semiotics
- Interpreted the patterns and themes found in the artifact
- Explained how this study contributes to the discipline of rhetorical communication

Questions?

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