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The ‘Real’ Meaning of Love

Love – what a simple concept. As Google defines as, “an intense feeling of deep affection” as well as, “a great interest and pleasure in something” when referred to as a noun, while as a verb described to, “feel a deep romantic or sexual attachment to (someone)” (Google Dictionary). This term that we experience, see, feel, despise and yet yearn for each and every day. The idea of love sounds so clear and straightforward. When compiled in a group of words, it sounds similar to any other term on the list. A definition and a few assembled letters create a word, create the simple term love. So, if love is so easy and understandable, why is it also so complex and to some, unreachable? How can a term so uncomplicated destroy some people’s lives? And to add to the difficulty of these problems, how is love able to send other individuals to eternal happiness and completion? Love is beautiful, yet ugly and blissful, yet heartbreaking and full of life, yet suicidal. How can such a simple term have so much meaning? Love – what an impossible concept.

Although the term, love, sounds so obvious, many individuals are already aware that this word possesses a drastically different message. Each person withholds a completely unique definition of love that comes from their own experiences with the term, however there’s so much more to this signified concept than one may realize. Our own encounters of love are not enough to identify specific conceptions of this word, however, “[s]emiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand” (Chandler). Through our experiences and personal knowledge of love we are able to come to terms with our own thoughts about this word, however regarding true facts about this matter, we understand this information, but allow our individual beliefs to cloud reality. Semiotics provide a great example of genuine meaning to this concept with no privatized interferences. The moment we enter this society, we are introduced to this idea of love that is already evolved from the original meaning which is why, “[s]emiotics is important because it can help us not to take ‘reality’ for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs” (Chandler). In addition to the meaning of love comes with signs used to connote, as well as denote this signified concept.

 One of the most common signifiers of love is the heart symbol. This image of the shape as seen in *National Geographic Kids* (See fig. 1.) holds immense simplicity and basic formatting of the average heart. Most individuals would peer at this image and automatically think of it as a plain heart and instantly connect it to love with no other thoughts. It’s as simple as that, but why? Why are hearts naturally intertwined with the word love? The connotation of a heart is the organ in one’s body that beats and pumps blood through vessels of the circulatory system in order to keep them alive, so what does this single part of the body have anything to do with the previously stated complex term of love? While the connotation of the heart may express an individual’s organ, the denotation between the heart in relations to love is the concept that as the heart is the center of the body, it must be the center of the emotions as well and while love is well known to be such a strong emotion, they correlated the two terms and ever since, these two have been involved. Therefore, while this simple image may appear to lack much meaning at all with love literally, semantically, the words possess plenty relation.

Fig. 1. Kidalova, Tetiana, and Dreamstime. “The Truth About Your Heart.” *Kids' Games, Animals, Photos, Stories, and More*, 1 Apr. 2014, kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/science/the-truth-about-your-heart/#heart.jpg. (National Geographic Kids)

 In addition to the first signifier of love, there are many common stereotypes to this term and the main standard concerning love is relationships, specifically romantic ones. And while this bias regarding love may be true information, up until recently in society, there has been a traditional view of relationships which is that love stands only between a man and a woman. Wherever one’s beliefs or opinions on this matter lies, this concept is false as displayed in the *Australian Human Rights Commission* (See fig. 2.). This blunt statement isn’t simply due to my feelings regarding this topic, however it’s the truth, whether the world is comfortable with it or not. Romantic relationships exist between man and woman, between man and man, between woman and woman, between man and object, between man and animal and I’m sure there are plenty of others to add. Some of these relationships are legal, have become legal recently or aren’t at all, but reality is that they exist, and the individuals of each relationship believe in it, as well as hold consent in it, so it is real. The connotation of a romantic relationship or a marriage is the officiality by two people making their connection permanent and while the known definition of relationship is close to the actual definition, as mentioned previously it is the supreme court rules that as people, we have the right to marry whom or whatever we love, objects included which isn’t in the known meaning. While objects aren’t known in the common definition, in previous years homosexual relationships weren’t necessarily associated with marriage either until recently and since this is such a current issue, some individuals still don’t believe these relationships to be real. There’s such tension between the issue of whether these relationships exist, that people often aren’t aware that they will exist either way despite what they believe because a romantic relationship is the connection of love between two people/objects/animals.

Fig. 2. Admin. “Australian Human Rights Commission.” *What Is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?*, 14 Dec. 2012, [www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/same-sex-community-guide](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/same-sex-community-guide). (Australian Human Rights Commission)

 While romantic relationships are an essential signifier of love, family/friend/stranger relationships are important as well. As I stated the connotation of a relationship previously, in this situation, the literal meaning follows the connection or contact between, perhaps a daughter and a mother or between two siblings or between two friends or acquaintances or even between two people who don’t even know each other. While I’m sure there are plenty of stereotypes regarding these relationships, the denotation I’m referring to in this case is the idea that this connection between these two individuals is so much more than a simple title of ‘my friend’ or ‘my mom’ and so many other relationships in one’s life. The simple meaning of family is a group of people that are connected by blood as seen in *Family Centered Treatment* (See fig. 3.), but how is this definition so bland when these individuals live together, share experiences, memories and interactions daily? The answer is simple too, it’s not. Each and every family out there has a story, whether it be devastating or enticing. These people grow up together and experience love, life and loss all in the same place. There’s more than a simple connection, but the love and emotions that radiate through these groups is alluring and may even possess the most captivating relationships of all because of the bond between these individuals. Not only does is this idea represented in families, but friends too and maybe even stronger in friends since we choose these relationships. However, while the relationships with family and friends may have great strength, relationships between strangers, lack the same love. While some may argue that people naturally express love to any individual that they encounter to due human nature, it’s a different type of love which isn’t a simple relationship either. The few moments one spent to hold the door open, smile or compliment another can go a long way in an individual’s day. This known signifier of love is categorized as a simple term but holds so much meaning in between the lines that only add to the original signified concept.

Fig. 3.   
“Family Centered Treatment.” *Child Family*, childandfamilyri.com/our-services/family-centered-treatment/. (Family Centered Treatment)

Furthermore, there are signifiers within the way that we express love. The connotation of how we express our love seems as simple as it sounds because it is literally how we show another person or thing our love for them. While the denotation becomes a little bit more difficult than this. Everyone communicates there love differently, but Gary Chapman, author of “The Five Languages of Love” categorizes these methods. The five languages that Chapman elaborates on in the novel are as followed; words of affirmation, physical touch, acts of service, quality time and receiving gifts. Why are some individuals more affectionate, yet are not as active with their words when expressing love? And why do others give incredible gifts, but aren’t as avid about spending time together? As I read the book, Chapman explains that the meaning behind this confusion in all kinds of relationships is the idea that how we express our love is how we want to receive it. He elaborates on this theory along with many others, but essentially the way that we show our love doesn’t appear so simple anymore, however lays out to be this complicated process in which we must interpret to better understand the relationship in order to truly express one’s love in the way that they need it to be. The signifier is now not as simple as it appears to be and must be well analyzed to help with the true understanding of the signified concept.

As a result of the in-depth explanations of each signifier along with their connotation and denotation, all of these ideas connect back to the original signified concept. Essentially, the signifiers reveal the theory that I approached previously following how love is not simple, but a very complex concept. Each of the signifiers represents a stereotype of the term, as well as a standard in how it relates to love. The heart is commonly associated with love, but just known as a simple shape and the ‘symbol’ of love, when in reality there’s meaning behind why it’s related to the concept, however if I were to interview 100 individuals and ask them if they knew the reason behind the heart with love, then most likely, not even half would be aware of the denotation of it. While relationships as a whole are stereotyped as a traditional form of the word, what truly exists is factual and real. The argument behind this idea is not whether these relationships should exist or not, it’s that they do and, “[t]he meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language but rather in the social context of its use” (Chandler). In addition to this theory, relationships are not so simple, but each has a story behind it and is expressed differently regarding whom is in the relationship which, “can help us to realize that information or meaning is not contained in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not transmitted to us – we actively create it” (Chandler) because every relationship comes with different experiences that we are apart of and the definition of the word cannot express this well enough. Lastly, to analyze the fourth signifier, the way that we express love is completely simplified from our actual love languages. As someone easily reads, thinks or watches how another expresses their love, this is a completely diverse experience from being able to actually show this, however in order to express their love, we must understand how to effectively communicate it. The true meaning behind love languages goes well beyond the five I listed previously as those are simple groups, but it’s the message behind how and why one expresses their love which defines this action, “[f]or instance, even in the very flexible medium of language ‘words fail us’ in attempting to represent some experiences, and we have no way at all of representing smell or touch with conventional media” (Chandler).

To summarize, love appears to be simple, but it really possesses a deeper semantic meaning that can be difficult to comprehend. I have concluded that this is the reason why some individuals fear love, because they don’t understand. Simply because someone has one bad experience with love, they hide from it and internalize their feelings. From this knowledge that I’ve gained while writing and analyzing semiotics, I’ve gathered that when we don’t truly understand the meaning or the denotation of any signified concept that we have a negative connection with it or none at all. With a concept as mundane as an object that we do not use on a daily basis this may not be a grand concern, however with a signified concept, such as love, this can be a challenge since we face this feeling everyday and constantly have it in our thoughts. When “every thought is a sign” (Chandler) humans can struggle to break down each concept and come to a deep comprehension with the concept. All in all, while some signs may lack importance within our lives, love is an avid concept that we must take the time to understand it’s meaning as well as the signifiers relating to it, in order to truly comprehend what this complicated term reflects regarding life.

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