STUDENT ESSAY

GOODMAN'S FEAST OF STYLE

Alan Peterson

Introduction includes author, title, and date of article.

Thanksgiving is a time for "families" to come together, eat a big meal, share their experiences and each other's company. In her November 24, 1988, article "Choosing Families," which appeared on Thanksgiving Day in the Washington Post, Ellen Goodman asks the question: "Who makes up these families?" By her definition, a family does not consist of just "blood" relatives; a family contains acquaintances, friends, relatives, people who are "chosen" to be in this year's "family." An examination of Goodman's essay reveals some of the elements of style she uses to effectively ask and answer her question.

Student's thesis.

Analysis of Goodman's organization.

Page reference given, according to MLA style.*

Goodman's clever organization compels the reader to read on. She begins by focusing on a Thanksgiving dinner scene, referring to families and households in terms of food. After setting the table by evoking the reader's memories of Thanksgivings past, Goodman asks the central question of her essay: "[W]hat is it that makes this collection of people a family" (49)? Goodman argues that the modern meaning of family has evolved so much that the traditional definition of family is no longer the standard. To clarify modern definitions, she provides examples of famous families: First Families. After suggesting that the Reagans have been the "chief defender of the American family" (49) for the last eight years, she points out that the Reagans, with their divorces, their adoptions, their estrangements, are anything but the traditional family they wish to portray. Rather, the Reagans represent the human traits that define the "contemporary reality" (49) of today's families. Next, President Bush's family is examined. Goodman points out that the Bushes' five children live in five different states, and that Barbara and George Bush, as young people,

*This essay illustrates formal documentation according to the Modern Language Association (MLA).

set up "temporary quarters in 17 cities" (50). She develops an answer to her question in the ensuing paragraphs. She observes that families today are disjointed, nontraditional, different from one another. She refers to families that are considered "stable or intact" (50) and shows how even those families can be spread out all over the country. In her closing paragraphs she repeats the question "What makes a family?" Then, after another reference to Thanksgiving dinner, she concludes the article by stating her main point: "All real families are made over time and through tradition" (50). Goodman's organization—a question, some examples, several answers, and strong confirmation—powerfully frames her thesis.

In an essay written about a theme as homespun as family and Thanksgiving celebrations, a reader would not expect the language to be too formal. Choosing her words carefully, Goodman cultivates a familiar and descriptive, yet not overly informal style. Early in the essay, Goodman uses simple language to portray the Thanksgiving meal. She refers to voices interrupting, arms reaching, leftovers that have to be wrapped up. Another effective technique of diction Goodman employs is the repetition of words and sounds. She points out that the Bushes, as young people, "left home again and again" (50). She defines the image we have of families as that of people created from the same "genetic code, living in the same "area code," and of cousins in "other Zip Codes" (50). Then, characterizing the reality of the configuration of today's American families, Goodman states: "A guest last year is a member this year," while a "member last year may be an awkward outsider this year" (50). An additional example of repetition appears in the first and last paragraphs. Goodman repeats the sentence fragment "Equal parts of food and conversation" (50). This informal choice of words opens and closes her essay, cleverly setting the tone in the beginning and reiterating the theme at the end.

Analysis of Goodman's wor choice and repetition.

Perhaps the most prevalent element of style present in Goodman's piece, and a dominant characteristic of her essay style, is her use of metaphors. From the opening sentences all the way through to the end, this article is full of

Analysis of Goodman's metaphors.

metaphors. Keeping with the general focus of the piece (the essay appeared on Thanksgiving Day), many of the metaphors liken food to family. Her references include "a cornucopia of family," "chicken-sized households" and a "turkey-sized family," people who "feast on the sounds as well as the tastes," and voices that "add relish to a story" (49). She imparts that a politician can use the word "family" like "gravy poured over the entire plate" (49). Going to the airport to pick up family members of these disjointed American families has become "a holiday ritual as common as pumpkin pie" (50). Goodman draws parallels between the process of "choosing" people to be with and the simple ritual of passing seconds at the table. Indeed, the essay's mood emphasizes the comparison of and inextricable bond between food and family.

Ellen Goodman's "Choosing Families" is a thought-provoking essay on the American family. She organizes the article so that readers are reminded of their own Thanksgiving experiences and consider who is included in their "families." After asking "What is it that makes this collection of people a family?" Goodman provides election-year examples of prominent American families, then an explanation of "family" that furnishes her with an answer. Her word choice and particularly the repetition of words and sounds make reading her essay a pleasure. The metaphors Goodman uses link in readers' minds the images of Thanksgiving food and the people with whom they spend the holiday. Her metaphors underscore the importance she places on having meals with the family, which is the one truly enduring tradition for all people. Perhaps the most important food-and-family metaphor comes in the last sentence: "a generous serving of pleasure in each other's company" (50).

Conclusion restates Goodman's position and student's thesis.

Work Cited

Goodman, Ellen. "Choosing Families." Washington Post. 24 Nov. 1988. Rpt. in Read, Reason, Write: An Argument Text and Reader. 8th ed. Ed. Dorothy U. Seyler. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. 50–51.

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