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Reader Response Essay  
11/11/2021

### Exploring Relationships through Haiku

How do haiku help explore relationships in so few words? This is the question I've been pondering on recently in the "Honors Global Haiku Traditions" course at Millikin University. Haiku, which generally are made up of three lines (sometimes more, sometimes fewer), have a way of conveying so much in so few syllables. Relationships are complicated, messy, and hard to describe, yet a haiku can tell readers entire stories about them in a dozen or so syllables. In this paper, I will focus on romantic relationships and how a haiku functions in explaining them.

her hair  
within my hands  
the smell of smoke

Dudley, Michael, *A Man in a Motel Room*, High/Coo Press Chapbook #18, 1986, page 10.

This haiku seems romantic without it ever explicitly saying it's romantic. I feel like that is a theme with a lot of the haikus in my paper, and I'd like to explore it specifically within this haiku. I believe the reference to "her" without explanation of who she is alludes to a romantic figure in his life, particularly because her hair is within his hands. Most likely, the reason for her hair to be between his hands is one of a romantic nature. The line "the smell of smoke" is so interesting to me because it can stand on its own or allude to the smell of her hair. Does she smoke? Does her hair smell like smoke? Does he smoke and since she's spent so much time with him, her hair has begun to smell like it? It seems to be a fond remark or at least a neutral one. He's noticing during this moment of intimacy this scent. Smoke is fleeting – is this a fleeting moment?

pistachio shells --  
wife's red fingers,  
redder lips

*A Man in a Motel Room*, Michael Dudley, Page 22

Here, the use of the word "wife" automatically establishes a relationship between the author and the person he's writing about. It can be assumed that her fingers are red from opening the pistachios. The line "redder lips" is so sensual and romantic! What I love most about it is that he's noticing this about his wife while she's doing something as minor as picking apart pistachio shells. She isn't doing anything extravagant or particularly attractive, yet he notices the color of her lips as she does this mundane every day task. This shows a deep connection between the two of them that is healthy and exciting. Even in marriage, he is noticing these new aspects of his wife. The haiku shows that they're spending time near each other, as well. I feel like this haiku depicts a healthy and happy relationship for these reasons.

kissing you  
my stomach  
stops growling

Ortiz, Victor. *Into Breath*. Red Moon Press, 2002, numberless pages.

This is, hands down, my favorite haiku I included in my paper and maybe that I've read all semester. It immediately establishes a romantic relationship with the act of kissing this person. The line "my stomach" leads to so much possibility: is their stomach filled with butterflies? Are they feeling nervous? Then, the final line adds this sweet element. Their stomach ceasing to growl implies that this act satisfies the author's hunger. Hunger for what: intimacy? Companionship? True love? Any way you spin it, this haiku is extremely romantic and beautiful. It implies that before he kissed this person, he had a hunger so strong that his stomach was growling. He was uncomfortable and in need of something to satisfy a human need. It's as if he needs human connection like he needs food and other human necessities.

she hugs me from behind  
my face in the steam  
of the potatoes

Willmot, Rod, *The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Black Moss Press, 1984 page 10.

I believe this relationship is immediately established as a romantic one as well because of the hug from behind. A hug from behind is so intimate and special. If someone hugs you from behind, it implies that they are someone very special to you and who you cherish intimacy with very much. It's implied that they are cooking together in the fact that their face is in the steam of potatoes cooking. This haiku makes me imagine a couple cooking in the kitchen together, very much like the pottery scene in *Ghost* except with food! Making food together is a very intimate thing to do. It implies that they maybe live together or one day might. The steam from the potatoes could be a metaphor for the overwhelming warmth that the hug brings.

morning again without you  
fried egg slithering  
on teflon

*The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Rod Willmot, page 29

Now, we arrive at our first sad haiku of the paper. "You" without an explanation seems to imply a romantic relationship. There is one "you" that he feels differently about than the rest of the population. I imagine he feels like the fried egg slithering on the Teflon: floating about meaninglessly, simmering in his feelings. "Slithering" implies sneaking about, not being proud of your actions, and being insecure in your actions. I can imagine this is how the author feels in that time of his life, having lost "you". This haiku implies that he has had morning without them for a while now, as he says morning *again*, as if this has happened many times. The author uses very deliberate word choice like the word "again" to imply a story without going into the details.

into the grass  
her short shorts fall  
with her creases

*The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Rod Willmot, page 48

This is the most explicitly sensual of the haikus I've included in this paper. I think this relationship is at the very least intimate if not romantic due to the short shorts falling. The line "into the grass" seems to imply that the two lovers are escaping into a more private setting. There is something so endearing about the way he refers to her creases. There is something so loving in that wording that makes my heart warm. He seems to be admiring her creases and celebrating them in this haiku. He is noticing the details of the act of her short

shorts falling, which feels more romantic rather than crude or perverted. He's enjoying each moment and is living in the present with her.

her breasts lift with her arms  
flowers on the curtains  
fold and unfold

*The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Rod Willmot, page 48

This haiku is also very sensual in that it talks about breasts and the nature of breasts. It can be inferred that this relationship to "her" is romantic, or at least intimate, since he has taken a fascination to her breasts. I feel like the folding and unfolding in this haiku can also relate to her body folding and unfolding as she reaches her arms up and down. I feel like the flowers on the curtains could also be a metaphor for birthmarks or blemishes on her body that she may have folding and unfolding as she moves.

a shift in the light  
she smiles to herself  
earrings swaying

Willmot, Rod, *Sayings for the Invisible*, Black Moss Press, 1988 page 70.

I feel like this haiku is all about noticing the little things about the person you love. He notices how the shift in the light looks on her, her smile, her earrings moving. Here, the reference of "she" without an explanation is used and it feels romantic. The swaying earrings imply movement: could she be happily walking about, smiling in the light? This haiku makes me think of the Netflix show *You*, when the main character Joe sees a woman, he's fascinated by and the filming goes to slow motion and the light reflects onto the woman, who is walking with a confidence and glow about her.

so like a snake  
her question-mark: the note  
left under my keys

*The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Rod Willmot, page 63

I've had a difficult time determining if this is a sweet or sour note. Snake-like imagery doesn't make me think of sweetness, but of slyness and deception. This note is important; it's placed under his keys so she knows he will see it. Here, the mystery of relationships is captured. The "what ifs" and anxiety of what's to come is shown. I feel like the question mark is bigger than just the note – is the author doubting their relationship? Is there a lingering question in the air that impacts their relationship greatly, slithering into their conversations and daily life like a snake?

coffee grounds  
wash up on my tongue  
still I think of her

*The Ribs of Dragonfly*, Rod Willmot, page 73

I have a love for this haiku not only because coffee is mentioned, and I love coffee, but because of the way the coffee ground image helps to convey the meaning behind the relationship. Coffee grounds are pesky and hard to get rid of. They're hard to swallow. They're bitter. The coffee grounds wash up on his tongue: a bitter

taste, an annoying feeling, stale and leftover. He still thinks of her in this bitter, leftover, annoying type of way. This author uses the metaphor of coffee grounds being like this long-lost love to convey all of these feelings of bitterness and annoyance in only two words.

In conclusion, haikus explore relationships in a variety of ways. There are ways that the haiku author can convey so much in so few words. By using juxtaposition of images and metaphor, much is said in few words. The use of referring to someone by their pronouns without explaining the relationship feels inherently romantic.

#### Works Cited

Oritz, Victor. *Into Breath*. Red Moon Press, 2002.

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