

Reece Brown
 Reader Response Essay
 10 November 2021

The Haiku of John Stevenson

After analyzing various haiku styles and writers over the past few months, I have found John Stevenson's work to be outstanding. I favor his work for many reasons, one of them being that his haiku aren't filled with "fluff" or confusing diction. He captures human experiences, memories, and relationships with so few words and his work is truly an art. John Stevenson writes haiku that are filled with grief, laughter, sadness, comfort, and hope, all of which are prevalent in human connection. When writing haiku, Stevenson believes that there is no "right" way to write a haiku and that it is an art form that is different for every person. With this being said, his haiku often open with a sensory image, but then lead to something deeper. With that being said, the concept of what this "deeper" idea is can be different for everyone. He finds it to be more satisfying when this is not quickly resolved or answered, but rather leaves the reader thinking.

In the author's introduction of his book, *My Red*, Stevenson mentions the word "eclectic" more than once. Eclectic means something is derived from various and diverse sources and this is true with his haiku as well. Additionally, throughout this book his haiku go through the four seasons. At the beginning of the book, he uses words like "sapling", "tulips", and "the summer sun" which alludes to summer and later transitions to autumn, winter, and finally ends the book in the spring. Stevenson also shifts through seasons in his life. For example, about half way through the book Stevenson includes several clustered haiku about death and the deeply felt grief he had for the loss of his wife. This part of the book displays a specific part of Stevenson's life and also the transitioning process into a new one. This book was beautifully done and displays human experiences and connections in such an honest, and relatable way.

a change in their voices...
 children finding
 a fledging

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 25

John Stevenson writes about a human experience in this haiku. I assume this haiku is centered around his children and them becoming adults. When children grow up and move out of their parents' house the parents are called "empty nesters" and what I especially like about this haiku is it represents the opposite side of this phrase. I also really appreciate the word choice. The first line in this haiku makes me think of children going through puberty and their voices becoming deeper. Although, it also can be perceived as having a voice for themselves along with their own individualized beliefs and thoughts. The rest of the haiku creates an image for the reader. A fledgling is a baby bird who has just developed feathers and for the first time, is capable of flying on their own. John Stevenson relates this back to his children who are now able emerge into adulthood and leave the "nest". I imagine not only a bird taking off for the first time, but I also imagine myself through my parents' eyes as I moved into my freshman dorm last year.

liking the same music
 we hope the rest
 will be easy

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 32

This haiku corresponds with human relationships. Oftentimes in a relationship, people find common interests and friendships. With this being said, having commonly appreciated things in life does not necessarily set up two people for a lifetime filled with happiness. Being in an intimate relationship with someone can bring about challenges that you wouldn't have otherwise and maintaining this bond takes a lot of work and effort. This poem captures the idea of the unknown when going into a relationship with someone. It is impossible to be aware of the outcome of things like this and one can only, quite literally, hope for the best. Additionally, this haiku does not contain a seasonal word per se, but does describe a season of a person's life. I would imagine this season to be that of a young person's life where they are beginning to create a relationship with someone, other than friendship and are ultimately hoping to settle down with someone and create a life.

fireflies...
could I still
catch one

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 38

This haiku is a perfect example of John Stevenson's way of opening a haiku with a sensory image. When reading the seasonal word "fireflies" the reader instantly has an image and setting come to their mind and for each person their image is unique. The next two lines of the haiku relate to human experience and the beauty of growing old. This haiku has a sense of playfulness and youth in it. As humans grow older, they no longer do the same things that they once found so entertaining. I particularly enjoy this haiku because it makes me think of someone who still notices the small things in life and wants to appreciate them once more. With that being said, other people could interpret these last two lines very differently, and that is the beauty of it all.

checkout line
my dad
could talk to anyone

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 48

This is another haiku that captures a single, simple moment of life, but also is deeper than just the event itself. In just three lines, the author was able to give insight into the personality of his father along with his feelings towards him. It suggests that his dad is a people-person and that the two of them also spend a lot of time together given that they are grocery shopping with one another. Readers can read this haiku and relate it back to their own father or grandfather who have similar qualities. Also, John Stevenson believes that there is no correct way to write a haiku and this poem is a great demonstration of this concept. There are no seasonal words of the weather along with no season of life mentioned. With that being said, this haiku is still very well done.

my son
for the first time
in clothes I've never seen

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 57

This is another haiku that demonstrates the human experience of parenthood and watching your children become their own unique individual. The concept of this haiku in my eyes is that John Stevenson's son most likely has his own source of income now and has bought his own new clothes. What I find so unique and intriguing about John Stevenson's style is that he captures such small experiences that no one really thinks twice about. When describing these things, the reader often is led to a larger significance that is extremely

relatable to their life. This haiku simply describes his son wearing a new shirt, for example, yet the meaning of this haiku is so much more and is filled with feelings of pride, or maybe even sadness at the thought of his son growing up.

first snow
a memory that won't quite
come to me

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 68

When reading this haiku, it instantly made me wonder "What was it like for my first snow?" and to which I went through all of the memories I could think of with snow in my life and realized I could not remember either. This haiku is meant to make the readers think of their own memories in life and reflect back on their childhood. For me, I was brought to memories with my family and all of the great times we had whether that was snowmobiling, making a fort, building a snowman, or having a snowball fight. I also think this haiku was meant to point out that there are such beautiful moments in life that you can't possibly remember them all. With that being said, it is so important that you capture and appreciate the moment right then and there. I came to this analysis and conclusion from three simple lines which is a testament to how powerful words can be and how open-ended John Stevenson leaves his work for his readers to appreciate and make their own. Additionally, the phrase "first snow" is a great example of the seasonal words he uses throughout his work and the haiku overall is a great illustration of Stevenson's ability to relate his haiku to human experiences.

her
being
dead
goes
on

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 75

This haiku is a perfect example of how John Stevenson writes haiku that displays raw human experiences. This particular haiku was written after his wife passed away and reflects his feelings of grief, but is also extremely relatable for so many people. When someone passes away there is an odd period of time where you realize that person is truly gone from your life and there seems to be a missing piece of you. The structure of this haiku displays this well. By having the haiku strung out with one word for each line this creates an emphasis on every word written. The haiku also becomes longer which represents the increasing time since the person who passed has been gone. Additionally, the word choice of "dead" is interesting here. He could have said "passed away" or "gone", but instead he uses "dead" which makes this haiku much more direct, powerful, and mournful. Lastly, this poem is a perfect example of the season throughout his own life of sorrow and sadness.

writer's conference
from a toilet stall I hear
someone quoting me

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 106

I appreciate this haiku because it captures such a small moment, is not filled with intricate wording, and is very humorous. This haiku opens with a simple setting and is then narrowed to a bathroom stall. The reader can fill in the blanks of what this would look like and then is able to analyze the rest of the haiku. Although, John Stevenson does not always write extremely deep poems that need to be over analyzed and I enjoy that about his work. He also leaves plenty of room for the reader to fill in blanks. For example, in this haiku we

wonder how he feels about hearing someone quote his work. I would like to imagine he feels proud, but is also laughing, considering he is hearing it from a toilet stall.

empty bottle
a few words
I would like to take back

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 119

This haiku opens up with another sensory image and in this case, is an empty bottle. This poem relates to the feeling of regret after getting into an argument with a significant other or family member. This concept is a common human experience and is displayed well in this poem. I think it is interesting to note the importance of order in this haiku. If “empty bottle” was in the third line of this haiku, instead of the first, it would change the entire image and meaning. Since it is in the first line, the reader can assume that the fight escalated or was possibly caused due to the influence of alcohol which seems to be an important aspect here. Rather, if the phrase was at the end of the haiku, we would assume that the person was drinking due to the fight and either wanted to numb their feelings, or forget it ever happened.

Christmas Day
the exchange
of custody

John Stevenson, *My Red*, p. 138

This is my all-time favorite haiku by John Stevenson. This haiku perfectly captures an imperfect reality for some people. My parents have been divorced since I was young and this haiku resonated with me extremely well. Again, the haiku opens up with a sensory image that gives the reader an idea of the weather, color scheme, temperature, and mood. The word choice in this haiku was brilliant. On Christmas almost everyone does in fact have an exchange, but it is usually of gifts. In this case, the exchange happens with children. John Stevenson created this haiku in a very simple manner and leaves a lot of room for the reader to fill in the blanks with their own creativity, or even personal experience. I appreciate how he doesn't have to explain or write out the significance of this event, but rather opens that up to his readers who get to decide why they think this personal experience is relevant.

Overall, John Stevenson is an excellent writer and captures the little things in life and human experiences very well. He also allows room for the reader to make the haiku their own. His haiku are not always traditional and are usually simple, yet demonstrate human emotions felt by everyone.

Works Cited

Stevenson, John. *My Red: The Selected Haiku of John Stevenson*. Edited by Randy & Shirley Brooks. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 2021.