

Masajo Suzuki's Relationship with Love

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Masajo Suzuki (1906-2003) had a complex relationship with love. In her haiku collected in *Love Haiku: Masajo Suzuki's Lifetime of Love*, she shows her varying thoughts on the concept; rather, translators tell it for her to the English-speaking world. She talks of disdain for love, woe at love in the wrong places, the longevity of her love, and much more. She came from a place of wisdom and experience, writing about herself and sharing her heart with the world. Not afraid to admit her faults, Masajo Suzuki was a true poet.

For our exploration of Masajo's life of love, we'll take a look at a selection of 6 haiku from *Love Haiku*. The first of which, sets itself in the summer. Throughout the book, every one of her haiku is accompanied with a word or phrase titled a "Seasonal word". Some seasonal words being more direct than others, each of Masajo's haiku finds itself a season. This haiku's seasonal word is "sheer summer kimono," the thinner, almost see-through (sheer) kimono to be worn in the summer. If the word didn't give it away, this haiku is set in summer.

sheer summer kimono—
it pushes them into misery
this love of mine

- Suzuki, *Love Haiku: Masajo Suzuki's Lifetime of Love*, p26

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: "usumono ya hito kanashimasu koi wo shite".

The translators left a note alongside this haiku: "When Masajo was 31 years old, she fell in love with one of her hotel's guests, Air Force Lieutenant Y.M. (1913-1977), then 24 years old. In those days infidelity was a crime in Japan. Masajo thought of herself as a sinner and felt sorry for her parents, her husband, her lover, and for herself. This is among the most popular of her love haiku."

The haiku showcases her woe at falling in love. The poem starts with the first line, "sheer summer kimono—" Masajo (or, her translators) used punctuation very often in this collection, one instance of punctuation for almost every haiku, usually a dash or ellipses. The story I see here starts with her in only a sheer summer kimono, potentially just after affairs with the man she fell in unlawful love with. The dash is a pause, a moment of reflection in the aftermath of her actions.. The following line "it pushes them into misery" is where she comes to the conclusion of regret in her actions, regret that she couldn't keep herself from falling for a man while married to another. She knows the shame these acts bring to her family, and bringing shame to them brings the very same upon her. "This love of mine" describes the infidelitous love both as the man

himself and as the action, the verb “love”. Altogether, this poem is one of shame and regret. Not what first comes to mind when you hear “love poem”.

Next, we’ll read a poem about winter. Masajo Suzuki often uses winter to describe a desolate feeling. An ending of something kind, or a prolonged, biting cold; in this poem we see the latter. The designated seasonal word for this haiku is “snow”.

in these three worlds
a woman is never home,
snow on snow on snow
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p28

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *on’na sangai ni ie naki yuki no tsumori keri*

Once again, the translators left a note: “*On’na sangai ni ie nashi* means that there is no home for a woman to live in peace in the whole world. She must obey her father when she is a child, humble herself to her husband when she gets married, and follow her eldest son after the death of her husband.”

In the last line, snow on snow on snow describes her endless winter in misogyny. She feels as if she can never truly bloom, she never gets a spring or summertime. Her was her birth as a woman. This patriarchal struggle feels entrapping, as every expectation says she must jump from man (father) to man (husband) to man (son), and if she is missing a man she is in the wrong. How freeing it must be to be wrong in this society. To never find a husband, to never bear sons, to live longer than your father. The idea in the second line, a woman is never home, is heartbreaking. Through the translator notes we learn that the three worlds are supposed to relate to father, husband, and son, all things we think of as family, all things our society is conditioned to accept as home. Yet, these aren’t home for her, and she suggests they aren’t for any woman. Thus, she and all women are left imprisoned by their men. An endless winter.

The following haiku begins with the word “firefly”. Fireflies are a common theme in Suzuki’s haiku in this collection, and for a few good reasons too. According to Japanese Language Expert Namiko Abe, fireflies hold great significance in Japan. Fireflies, or “hotaru” serve as a poetic metaphor for love and passion (Abe, 2025). Viewing fireflies is a very popular summer activity in Japan, assigning fireflies to the summer season. For this reason, our seasonal word is “firefly”.

firefly light:
I step off the path
of women’s virtue
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p33

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *hotarubi ya on’na michi wo fumihazushi*

Masajo herself left the following note to accompany this haiku: “What is a woman’s path? Is it to live a life of good wife and wise mother? I have stepped out from that path. When I am watching the firefly’s light going on and off, I have no idea what will happen to my future.”

What I gather from this haiku is another retelling of her scandalous love. The firefly light would be the tantalizing romance, flickering as she mentions in the note, the love following a “will they/won’t they” pattern. Stepping off the path of women’s virtue, in this sense, would be betraying her family. Following a love that isn’t her husband, bringing shame to her husband and child, and following a new and exciting joy. The firefly brings her to summer, a time of joy and love and warmth, finally stepping away from the winter of the “three worlds” haiku.

The next poem finds itself in spring, with the designated seasonal word, “Japanese quince flower”. The quince plant is a decorative shrub that produces an edible, though bitter, fruit. According to Dr. Gabi Greve on WorldKigoDatabase.com, the Japanese quince flower symbolizes endurance and hardiness (Greve 2006). We see this below through Masajo’s love enduring “his cold-heartedness”:

his cold-heartedness:
shouldn’t my love begrudge it?
quince rain
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p47

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *jônashi wo uramu mo ai ka boke no ame*

Note from Masajo: “Bearing a grudge against the man and longing for him at the same time, these are what a woman’s heart does. And it is called love. The crimson of the Japanese quince deepens as it gets wet with rain.”

From my perspective, this seems like an unhealthy relationship, or maybe a relationship in a rocky period. Or, if you look at this story through the context of her affair, maybe it’s the aftermath, where she finds herself still loving her now ex-husband. Immediately this poem has a multitude of branching interpretations. Where does “his cold-heartedness” stem from and what does it entail? What should her love “begrudge”? Finally, we get to quince rain, and we find that no matter the story, her love endures the hardship, even growing deeper, stronger through the rain.

Another transitional season, we come to autumn, with our next seasonal work designated as *Mozu*, or shrike. The translators left us a note for this word: “*Mozu* (shrike) is an autumn *kigo* (seasonal word). The bird has a very sharp voice and its voice is often made into haiku. It is also famous for the way in which it stores its prey. *Mozu* catches insects and frogs and skewers them on twigs.” This paints the shrike as a deadly and efficient bird, predatory. The “skewer” method also makes them very intelligent and calculated.

shall I betray him
or let him betray me?
the shrike’s shrill cry
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p59

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *uragiru ka uragiraruru ka mozu takane*

Masajo left another note: “There was once a time of difficulty. I thought of breaking faith with him before he did it to me but nothing happened after all.”

This is another poem that shows her difficulties with romance and love. Here, she's struggling with overthinking, setting up a metaphor with the shrike as her intelligent and ruthless, close to skewering the relationship through betrayal. While the poem itself nor the notes specify, I assume this is with her second husband, as she wrote "nothing happened after all," despite the many times she referenced cheating on her husband in previous haiku. I think the line order has great significance in this storytelling, too. First, she is presented with an opportunity that she considers, but first shoots down: "shall I betray him". Next, she reconsiders through the lens that she is at risk of being betrayed: "or let him betray me". She feels as if she has the power to destroy the relationship but also her betrayer by betraying him first: "the shrike's shrill cry". In the end, nothing comes of it, but this was a strong moment of tension for her.

Coming back to summer, our next seasonal word is "sweet rice dumplings", a summertime food in Japan. The translators gave this insight: "*Shiratama* is a rice-flour dumpling chilled and served with brown sugar syrup, a popular summer sweet. The white of the *shira* (white) *tama* (ball-shaped thing) is very refreshing in the heat." Here, they seem to not be used as strong symbolism, but more so to create the imagery of the story.

sweet rice dumplings–
even to my love
a little white lie
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p69

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *shiritama ya aisu nimo uso tsuite*

Note from Masajo: "This is one of my favorite haiku. I fibbed and he knew it well. This happened one day–the cute fib of a woman."

The image she creates here starts with something cozy, some yummy food. I picture a table being set at home with sweet rice dumplings. Then there's a pause. This feels like the awkward silence when something is wrong but people refuse to address it in favor of preserving the peace. In "even to my love" we see how much she cares about him, and how this tension affects even him. Finally, we see it in "a little white lie", the subject of the tension. She lied, and, like she described in the note, he knew. This must be another poem about her affair, the time between her first event and when it all fell apart. The facade of a happy home found in the dumplings is nothing but "a little white lie", "a cute fib", keeping the peace.

Staying in summer, our next seasonal word is "beer". I believe there is no strong symbolism utilized here with this word, beer is just there to describe her drinking habits.

without regret...
is such a life possible?
beer foam overflowing
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p70

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *kui naki sei ari ya biru no awa koboshi*

Masajo wrote: "I can say I do not have any regrets, but deep in my mind it remains like a precipitate. Is there anyone who lives and has no regrets? The death of my ex-husband makes my heart suffer from remorse.

The note she left alongside this haiku is my favorite of all the notes in the entire book. I connect with her statement personally, and can see the struggle her brain is dealing with. She never got to make amends with her ex-husband, and now that can only ever be a regret, as he has passed. Even if she decides to live in the positive, say she has nothing to regret, it will always haunt her. It's heartbreaking, as we find her drinking away the pain in the poem itself. She seems deep in thought about how she could live without any regrets; "without regret..." and "is such a life possible?". In "beer foam overflowing", we see the bottomless glass of her despair, as she realizes she will never be regret-free. This is another one of her many woeful love poems.

We end still in summer, with "distant fireworks" as our seasonal word. Fireworks are usually a celebration, at the end of an event, an accomplishment. We see how she uses this simple symbolism in her haiku.

the one who died
the one who divorced me--
distant fireworks
- Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, p78

Original Japanese kanji pronunciation: *shinishi hito wakareshi hito ya tôhanabi*

Another note from Masajo: "My late ex-husband and the man who divorced me, both had strong karmic ties with me. They were both good men, and I remember only their good sides now."

This poem seems to contradict the previous. We've left her drowning in sorrow, beer, and regret, and now we find her looking fondly upon her past. The "distant fireworks" serve as a pretty yet quiet celebration of the good times she's had, the distance being the time passed since the two men left her life. Even as she names them by death and divorce in "the one who died" and "the one who divorced me--", she keeps a positive attitude about them. Looking back, while the memories are far away, they are positive.

This positive outlook seems to be a new stasis for her, as she's come to adore the love she experienced through her life, though during it she so often lamented it. It seems that her attitude on love had a large overarching curve through her love. Love enticed her at first, filling her with excitement and energy, even at the start of her affair, when she felt as if she was following the fireflies. Then she dealt with shame and heartbreak. She came to loathe her situation, the feelings that caused it, and the system that doomed her to this fate. In the end, though, after being divorced then becoming a widow, she has her moments of reflection, and she ends up lingering on only the positive moments. She's come to enjoy the love that for so long seemed to plague her life. We see all this in Masajo Suzuki's love haiku.

Works Cited

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