

Alexis Rotella: Strong and Subtle Female Voices

Upon reading a vast collection of haiku by Alexis Rotella, I have found her great variety of style extremely intriguing. She writes from a place of authenticity about her experiences. She writes about nature, love, friends, frustrations, annoyances, and sadness. She covers a wide breadth and array of human emotions and experiences. However, throughout all her different haiku, she maintains a powerful and unapologetic female voice. This feat is especially powerful when you consider that many of her poems were written in the 1980s. In this essay, I wish to reflect specifically on her haiku with feminist themes. Additionally, I want to pay special attention to those haiku with themes of frustration, as it is often an emotion that is neglected in haiku. Rotella's powerful voice can convey complex issues in the fight for women's equality in a few short lines. Likewise, she conveys the struggle of women living within the time and society we do very concisely and accurately. With these characteristics in mind, I will be reflecting upon my responses and interpretations to nine of her haiku.

"This tea has wonderful body,"
he says,
touching my knee.

Alexis Rotella, *Looking for a Prince*, 6

To start out with, this haiku is a great example of the hidden layers we wish to find in truly great haiku. The body does not, in this haiku nor in "his" mind, refer to the tea, but rather the woman he is with. The unobtrusive subtext makes me squirm in my seat. The flavor of tea is not any sort of reason nor permission to touch someone's knee. Without using any crass, harsh, or, frankly, literal language, the idea of sleaziness and squeamishness is applied extremely well. From a feminist perspective, this haiku highlights how many men believe they can touch a woman whenever he feels like it and will make up any lousy excuse to do so. Additionally, the quotation marks make the beginning line quite prominent. As readers, we get the sense that this phrase is something that has stuck in the author's mind perhaps so far as years after the incident. It adds a sense of power and gravity to the haiku. This is not some little date that went wrong, this is more than that. It had a lasting effect and impression.

He leads me to his favorite table
his face
facing the mirror.

Alexis Rotella, *Looking for a Prince*, 3

In this haiku we find both structural elements and implied elements that are intriguing. In choosing to space each line farther over, we visually see the path that the narrator and her date are taking to his favorite table. Additionally, "face" being right next to, but a line down from "facing" gives the impression that the words are mirror images of each other. This clever element only highlights Rotella's point more. We additionally have the consonance of h and f sounds, which only further adds dramatic flair to the haiku. In relation to this haiku and Rotella's voice and perspective, her ironic experiences only further several points regarding the treatment of women and the expectation of women. Often, women are accused of being extremely vain, but in this poem, it is the man who is in love with his reflection in the mirror. Additionally, this haiku also nods

to another notion as well. Men, unfortunately, are brought up to look for a romantic partner who is good for him. It is much less about who the woman is by herself, but what she can bring to the table for his own benefit. This theme is highlighted in the poem, for even though the man may be looking across the table at his date, he is truly looking at his date in relationship to his reflection, and that makes the difference, for the woman is looking at the man alone.

Funny, he says,
I don't look
Buddhist

Alexis Rotella, *The Color Blue*, 54

This haiku pairs nicely with the former, as it also is in relation to looks. Society expects women to look a certain way, and for their looks to be an indication of how they act. The man, in this case, is stating that Rotella does not look Buddhist, but note the careful word choice here. He is not mentioning how he is surprised she is Buddhist, she is surprised that she doesn't *look* Buddhist. This kind of thinking—that appearances denote action—is exactly the kind of inappropriate thinking that leads to ideas such as “clothes equate consent” and so on. Once again, we see how this off-handed comment offends and inspires Rotella to create a haiku about her experiences. This man could have asked her about Buddhism. He could have shown interest, but he didn't. He instead commented on her appearances in relationship to it, and nothing more. He demeans her to nothing more but her appearance, despite having knowledge of something greater inside.

Dangerous curve
taking back
my hand.

Alexis Rotella, *An Unknown Weed*, __

Rotella once again utilizes poetic devices to her advantage to create a multi-meaning and thought-provoking haiku. She begins her haiku with the word “dangerous” opposed to “his dangerous,” “a dangerous,” or “the dangerous” curve. This shocks the reader and immediately immerses them in the world of the haiku—it sucks them in. Additionally, ending lines one and two with the words “curve” and “back” are reminiscent of the curve of the lower spine, suggesting sexuality. The visual ending of each of the lines creating a backslash also increases the visual feel of this withdrawal of the hand. Finally, the period at the end of the poem represents the solidity of her choice.

Now comes the more intriguing question, which is: What is the dangerous curve? I have a few theories. Perhaps the curve is the curve of the arm a crane of the neck towards a body part that the narrator does not desire to be touched. There are several ways that theory could align. Additionally, it could also be that the conversation took a dangerous turn—or her date through her a curve ball. The dangerous curve could be a combination of these two phrases. Regardless of the actual meaning of the line, the emotional response Rotella wanted to elicit is as clear as day.

Women's march
a lone gull
circles

Alexis Rotella, *The Color Blue*, 50

This haiku can be interpreted in many different ways, which is one of the reasons I think I am so drawn to it. When I first read it, I pictured a woman showing up to what was supposed to be a grand women's march in front of the courthouse. However, she realizes she's the only one who shows up. However, she decides to make her circles outside the courthouse anyways just as the gull does overhead. However, when reading it again, I mistook the word *gull* for the word *guy*. I began to ponder if the similarity was an intentional choice by Rotella. Maybe at the women's march there is only one man joining in the protests. Whatever way you interpret it, it is clear this haiku is meant to represent the lack of support from people, despite what they may say. Perhaps they are for a particular movement in theory, but when it comes to action, very little are actually willing to stand up for what they believe in and make a change.

The feminist
how she hates
pink!

Alexis Rotella, *Looking for a Prince*, 62

In this haiku, Rotella calls out those who pretend to have a certain stance when they actually don't. Being a feminist is not about hating feminine things. It's not about women wanting to be treated the same way as men, or act as men. It's about everyone having equal treatment regardless of gender. In terms of the writing style, I love the use of an exclamation point at the end of pink. It almost makes you think of someone saying "Pink! How ghastly!" in relationship to a certain item or style. I can imagine Rotella shaking her head in the background disappointedly while witnessing this display.

The pilot turns out
to be a woman –
now I can relax.

Alexis Rotella, *Looking for a Prince*, 71

It is an unfortunately common trope that people feel more comfortable while a man is in charge. Many claim that it is due to women being more emotional, although, of course, there is absolutely nothing to back such a baseless claim. However, it is less about the capabilities of one gender over another, but rather about conformity with the status quo. It is more comfortable for many to have a man in power because men have had the opportunity to be in power for longer. It is nothing to do with ability, and it has everything to do with the history of our patriarchal society. This haiku I find to be a sarcastic and snide remark made by Rotella. Perhaps she was on board a plane and heard a man in the row in front of her make a sexist remark about the pilot. I can imagine her saying this haiku just loudly enough to be within earshot of the man who made the remark.

Third marriage—
she's independent
again!

Alexis Rotella, *Looking for a Prince*, 47

Similarly, to the haiku beginning "The feminist," I find the utilization of the exclamation point to contribute greatly to the tone of this piece. Again, I feel its sarcastic exclaim. This haiku provides a commentary on how

women are so conditioned that their life only begins once they find a husband. In fact, note my use of the word once in the previous sentence rather than what it should be—if. But yet, we all still say “once.” In fact, many women feel they are not complete without a partner. We are taught that we are half of a whole. Thus, ironically, despite what it should be, a woman married is only a woman who is independent in the context of such a world. To be dependent is to be independent in this kind of society, and what a sad narrative that is.

So proud
of the children
I never had

Alexis Rotella, *Between Waves*, ____

Finally, while many of Rotella’s haiku written around this theme have a sarcastic and witty feel to them, not all of them do. In fact, the last haiku I shall mention is one of these exceptions, and is, perhaps, my favorite of all her poetry. Now, one could argue that this haiku should be read as another sarcastic witty haiku, but my reading of it is not that way at all. I think this haiku speaks Rotella’s genuine happiness towards her childless life. Not only is she breaking away from the standard that, unfortunately, still today is expected by woman, she is glad that she did. Especially since this haiku was written several decades ago, the courage to decide not to have kids and be vocal about that choice is rare. She is proud of herself for being able to live life the way she wants. She is proud of herself for not raising children who would, for whatever reason, not live a life with parents who do not want to be parents. She made the responsible choice for herself and is not ashamed of it. This is why, out of all her haiku, I find this one to be the one most powerful in the theme of women empowerment.

Ultimately, in all of these selected haiku, we get a sense of Rotella’s powerful voice and perspective as a woman in society. She utilizes punctuation, diction, literary devices, and flowery language to her advantage as she crafts poems reducing complex and heavy subjects into a few short lines. She clearly relates her experiences and feelings with brevity and emotional depth, allowing her readers to experience the epiphany of the meaning of her words, thus solidifying herself as a poet worthy of note.

Works Cited

Rotella, Alexis. *Between Waves*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2015. Print.

Rotella, Alexis. *Looking for a Prince*. Cairnbook, PA: White Peony Press. 1991. Print.

Rotella, Alexis. *The Color Blue*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2017. Print.