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Global Haiku
January 21, 2021

Reader Response Essay

Articles of Meaning: The Use of Clothing in Haiku

Through my journey of reading haiku, I noticed a trend of authors using clothing to add greater detail and to emphasize the image they are creating. I appreciate the use of an inanimate object to hold such meaning. Using clothing in haiku can produce a range of emotions for the reader. Because humans often have attachments to material possessions, clothing can be used to describe memories of someone or something in haiku. Other times, specific articles of clothing are connected to certain events currently happening in the haiku. Because clothing is so common and an integral part of our lives, it allows for the reader to make easy connections and interpretations.

crisp autumn chill
the ultrasound shows nothing
I pack the booties away

Angie Short, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, pg. 24

The use of clothing in this Angie Short haiku gives a lasting impression for the story and to the reader. The first line sets a sharp, chill feeling with its weather, but the second line makes it even more dark and somber. Instead of describing an emotion, the author ends the haiku with an action—packing away baby shoes. This haiku reminded me of Ernst Hemingway's six-word story "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Both of those works brought me the same, sad emotions, and used baby shoes to do so. Because the author packs the booties away instead of throwing them in the trash, it makes me wonder if this was not the first time this has happened and if they are planning to try to get pregnant again. By using clothing, instead of describing an emotion in the last line, allows the reader to imagine their own feelings in that situation.

grandfather's old boots
I take them
for a walk

George Swede, *Almost Unseen*, pg. 62

creaking barn door
Grandpa's hat
still hanging from the rafters

Angie Hawk, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, pg. 23

This Angie Hawk haiku and this George Swede haiku are both examples of how clothing in haiku can hold heavy memories and feelings. I paired these two haiku together because of their excellent use of a grandfather's old clothes. By saying that they are not just clothes, but that they are clothes of a grandfather, these haiku create deep emotions. Both of them give off somber and nostalgic tones, because it sounds like their grandfathers have passed away. These sound like private and reflective haiku.

George Swede introduces a unique action with grandfather's boots. I picture him putting on the boots and taking a walk around the grandfather's yard. I can imagine him using these boots as a way to feel connected to his grandfather and to reminisce on memories they shared. George Swede is known for writing honest, and emotional topics in his haiku. Unlike Swede who used clothes in a way to reminisce, Angie Hawk uses clothing as a detail in a larger space. I pictured the hat high up and dusty. Because she capitalizes "Grandpa's" it changes my perception of the hat. I imagined a hat that had no chance of being mistaken for someone else's, like a hat that says "#1 Grandpa" on it. Angie Hawk writes that the hat is still hanging there, implying that it hasn't moved for a while, which makes me wonder how long it had been since Grandpa wore the hat.

bottom line
all my summer slacks
one size smaller

Natalie Kuznetsova, *#Femku* vol. 25, pg. 10

I found this haiku in an issue of *#Femku*, an interesting, online magazine of female and non-binary authors. I liked the playfulness in this haiku, written by Natalie Kuznetsova. I imagined these pants were a new purchase for the season, but were then washed incorrectly, and now they have shrunken in size. I imagined "bottom line" refers to the lines inside of the cap of detergent you fill when doing laundry. Slacks is a very specific pant, so it gives insight into perhaps the author's job and style. Maybe these slacks were supposed to be dry cleaned, not washed at all, but the author did not realize that until it was too late. After they are dried, the author cannot wear any of their summer slacks because they have shrunken in size and length. This haiku is mainly about clothing, but also touches on the role clothing plays in our life. I imagine the stress and disappointment the author felt after shrinking their clothes, greatly affected the rest of their day.

garage sale...
the halter top she wore
on our honeymoon

Randy Brooks, *School's Out*, pg. 93

This haiku written by Randy Brooks demonstrates the lasting memories humans attach to inanimate objects, in this case, being clothing. The author is using a halter top to represent the emotions related to a honeymoon and marriage. I imagine this marriage has lasted for quite a few years, and that comes with style and size often changing when it comes to clothing. During the cleaning out and deciding what items should be sold in the garage sale, the author and his wife came across the top and began reflecting on their honeymoon. A moment passes of "Oh maybe I should keep this shirt for the memories," but then they remember that it is just a shirt, and it goes into the pile. In my first few reads of this haiku, I actually imagined that this marriage ended in divorce, and that the author happened to walk by his ex-wife's garage sale in the neighborhood and noticed the top. Because they are still dealing with emotions of that divorce, the sight of the halter top struck them. While it is still just a shirt, the author has now projected his emotions onto it.

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outside the fog
pink pussy hats

Deb Keon, *Modern Haiku* vol. 48.3

There is so many things I love about this haiku by Deb Keon. *Modern Haiku* is a haiku magazine that posts issues a few times a year. Unfortunately, in the online samples, there are no page numbers. This haiku is an example of how clothing can change the interpretation of a haiku. Introducing the pink pussy hats introduces at the last line completely flips the image of this haiku. The use of the line breaks and capitalization in "WASHINGTON MONUEMENT" is very original and useful in this haiku. After the first two lines I pictured the monument on a foggy morning, with not very many people around. Once I read the last line, I instantly pictured the Women's March that followed the 2016 election. Haiku do not always use plural form, but here, the hats are plural. A singular hat would have created a different image, but plural hats creates "strength in numbers" picture.

flower shop girl
her smock the same color
as the daffodils

Patricia Neubauer, *Modern Haiku* 37.2

Another *Modern Haiku* poem that uses clothing in an interesting way is this one by Patricia Neubauer. This haiku pulled a very specific imagined response out of me. Daffodils are my favorite flower and my grandmother has worked in a flower shop for many years, so this haiku also makes me fondly think of her. I love the colors this haiku bring to my mind. The matching of the flower to the smock, paints such a bright and happy picture of yellow in my mind. I can smell the smock in this haiku. I have been in the back of the shop my grandmother works at many times in my life. Flowers arrangements are beautiful and do smell nice when they are first bought, but the glue used for some arrangements and the rotting flowers and leaves scattered at the workplace, do not as much. That work smock holds in those smells even after you leave work. My reader response of this haiku shows how one article of clothing can trigger specific memories when writing haiku.

almost unseen
among the tangled driftwood
naked lovers

George Swede, *Almost Unseen*, pg. 33

Contrasting from the other haiku in this study, this George Swede haiku effectively introduces the idea of no clothing at all. Being naked brings up heavy feelings for readers, from embarrassment to excitement. After reading, the first two lines, I imagined a wooded area with a creek with no people. The last line introduces the center point of this haiku. The people are what was almost unseen. Calling them "naked" lovers creates a drastically different image than if the haiku ended with "two lovers." The use of no clothing lets the imagination of the reader wander quite a bit.

the flush beneath
her white shift
wild strawberries

Mark Brager, *Modern Haiku* 43.3

Another haiku I found from *Modern Haiku* was this elegant one from Mark Brager. Like the haiku by Patricia Neubauer, this one brings great colors to my mind. I also love the careful word choices of “flush” “shift” and “wild,” in this haiku, because of the season it brings to my mind. I imagined that the flush in this person’s skin is as red as the wild strawberries. The strawberries and the white shift make me think of a summer day. My first read made me think that the flush was from embarrassment, but now I think of it as a sunburn. Shift dresses are very flowy, so I can see a summer breeze blowing the skirt and hair of this woman. The dress is white and I always worry about getting a stain or spilling food whenever I wear white clothing, so if I was the woman in this haiku, I most likely got strawberry juice on my white dress and am blushing from the embarrassment. The clothing in this haiku sets the tone of it for me. The flow of a shift dress gives me a feeling of peace and tranquility.

Haiku gives so much room for the reader to interpret and attach their own images and emotions to. Haiku is the place where everyday occurrences and objects can stir deep emotions within a reader. In my time of haiku, I have noticed clothing often taking a part in these ways. I appreciate the way clothing can show individual expression, and how it can hold such meaning to us, even as an inanimate object. It can evoke lighthearted and funny emotions out of readers, or somber and heartbreaking emotions. Clothing in haiku has proven to be an effective element to emphasize detail, emotions, memories, and interpretations in haiku.

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