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EN 335
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George Swede Reader Response: Psychology in Haiku

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When we think of haiku, we have the image in our head of a short poem inspired about the world around us. Authors such as Peggy Lyles often write about the things that they observe in their life and turn them into these beautiful short poems that tell us so much in so few words. During this class the author that has stuck out to me the most was George Swede. In reading his haiku I have noticed that like Peggy Lyle, Swede writes haiku about life but from a different lens.

George Swede worked for Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, Canada as Chair of the of the Department of Psychology and the School of Justice Studies. This background is prevalent in his haiku as his haiku are deep in a psychological sense. Swede first became involved with haiku in 1976 after he was asked to comment on Makoto Ueda's *Modern Japanese Haiku* by the editor of the *Canadian Book Review Annual*. His other involvement with a haiku includes being the co-founder of Haiku Canada, an Assistant Editor for Red Moon Press from 2000-2008 and the Editor for *Frogpond* from 2008-2012.

For class one of the selections of haiku we had to read was *Almost Unseen* which was published by Brooks Books in 2000. The title of this selection caught my interest from the beginning as I was curious as to what was "unseen." As I have already stated many authors of haiku get the inspiration for their work from what they view in their life, so to have the collection include the word "unseen" struck me as interesting. After reading the haiku from the selection I the title began to take on a different meaning to me. The word "unseen" now made me think of an introspective look. The haiku all seemed to have a deeper meaning to them than what meets the eye so if you just take them at face value the meaning behind them will be left "unseen." These haiku all struck me as psychological in nature, you had to think and dig deep to get to the message within, this made more sense once I learned of Swede's background in psychology.

city park
the stone hero's darkside
hides a drug deal

Swede, *AU*, page 24

This haiku had a powerful impact to me. When you look at it from the surface you see a drug deal that is happening in the park. The haiku mentions that this is a "city park" so what comes to my mind is a more urban environment similar to Chicago or New York City. Areas like these are fairly infamous for the rate of usage of illicit drugs. When you read it the first time it gives the vibe of a normal drug deal, however there is more to unpack with this haiku. First there is the location of the drug deal, he specifically says it is on the "darkside" of the stone hero, so it is a shadow. Shadows are commonly used to describe the location of more incorrigible activity or acts that one wishes to hide from the public. Another interesting detail was that Swede specifically referred to it as a "stone hero" not a normal statue. This makes me think about the hidden darkness in humanity that exists in humans we may have thought of as "heroes." There is a darkness to everyone where they hide things, they do not want the public to see which could have also been the case for the "hero" whose likeness had been immortalized in stone.

dropping stone after stone
in the lake I keep
reappearing

Swede, *AU*, page 25

Another haiku from the collection that had a little more than meets the eye to me after reading it. When I first read the haiku, I imagined myself nearby that lake dropping the stone seeing my reflection. When I read it again the stones began to represent struggles. When you drop a stone into the water, the water is disrupted and begins to ripple making it hard to see anything. To me the water represented life and when another stone hit the water the struggle made it harder to see my reflection in the water. Struggles in life always come as they are unavoidable, but the “water” will always settle again. It may seem like you are losing yourself but when the waters are calm again you will once again see yourself or, as Swede put it in the haiku you will keep “reappearing.”

stepping on
sidewalk ants the boy
everyone bullies

Swede, *AU*, page 28

This haiku unlike the previous ones did not have a deeper meaning to them once I read it multiple times. This haiku was more straightforward in the use of psychology and I also saw the background of justice studies in a way as well. From the haiku we have a straightforward image of a young boy stepping on ants on the sidewalk. The question that immediately comes to mind is why is this boy stepping on the ants? The haiku specifically mentions that he is the boy that “everyone bullies.” This is where I see the background in psychology, we know that in many cases those who are victims of bullying often will take it out on those who are smaller and weaker than they are. In this case if everyone is bullying this boy than he must be the smallest and weakest person around, so who does he vent his anger on? The ants end up being the victim as they are the only thing smaller and weaker than he is. This also leads to where I saw the justice studies background. Many times, with people who are diagnosed as psychopathic or who end up becoming serial killers, started by harming small animals, this case is ants and not cats or other house pets, but it could be a launching point.

alone at last
I wonder where
everyone is

Swede, *AU*, page 87

This was probably my most favorite haiku from this collection. Similar to the previous haiku I do not see a lot of hidden meanings in the words and imagery in this haiku. It comes across as a straightforward psychological haiku. It is also the poem from this collection that I personally identified with the most. I personally have depression and social anxiety, so I have a habit of keeping people at arm’s length or pushing them away all together. I am always doing my best to be left alone. This has become a bit of a double-edged sword, however. When I am struggling with my depression and feel like I need someone to talk to, I look around and wonder where everyone is only to realize that I was the one who pushed them away to begin with. It is a vicious cycle that I feel this haiku did a very good job at capturing.

Another work by Swede that I enjoyed was *Eye To Eye With A Frog*. This work I noticed had a lot of references to water and warmer weather. However, the haiku in this collection also had those deeper psychological elements to them similar to those in *Almost Unseen*. I enjoyed looking at these haiku and

looking for these deeper elements that Swede likes to include in his haiku, it is almost like playing haiku Where's Waldo in a way.

The caged crow
caws, beats its wings—
my thoughts exactly

Swede, *Eye To Eye With A Frog*, page 10

This haiku was possibly my favorite of the haiku in this collection. When I read it my mind was immediately reminded of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, well not so much the content of her book but the title itself. The haiku gives a clear image of a crow that has been locked in a cage. The crow is cawing and beating its wings which makes me think that the crow is getting antsy and wants to get out of the cage. The relatability of this haiku hit me with the next line, "my thoughts exactly." I know a lot of people, myself included, who feel like that crow. They feel trapped in a cage and they are crying out and trying to escape but just can't get out. This is another haiku where I feel like Swede did a great job in capturing the angst of the human mind.

Two people in the same body crowded nights

Swede, *Eye To Eye With A Frog*, page 12

This haiku was very straightforward to me. This haiku clearly exhibited the background in psychology that Swede has, as when reading this haiku, I immediately thought of multiple, or split, personality disorder. I do not know anyone personally who has this disorder, but I learned in my psychology classes that this is not something that can be controlled. There is often a trigger that causes the personality to switch and the "main" personality is not always aware of what the trigger for the switch is. I would say that "crowded nights" is an interesting way to describe this. When you are out with friends, assuming they are aware of this disorder, that could definitely be considered crowded. Another way to look at it is that crowds are often a cause of discomfort for some people. The idea of "sharing" your body with another personality that you cannot control is definitely something that would make me feel uncomfortable.

I was also able to find a collection of Swede's work on a website called *terebess.hu*. There were no referenced to collections that these haiku were from, but I did run into some haiku that I had already come across in previous selections. However, I did also come across some new haiku that I had not seen. These haiku did still contain the psychological elements that I have come to know and love from Swede's work.

storm wind
spider clings to
its creation

Swede, *Terebess Asia Online*

This haiku gave me a similar feeling to the haiku I had written about previously about dropping the stones into the lake. The haiku upon first read gives a clear image of a spider that is clinging to its web as storm winds are blowing all about. As I read this haiku more, I started to see the winds representing life's struggles similar to the stones from that previous haiku. In this haiku I saw myself as the spider caught in the chaos of the storm and the web started to represent my life. As we live through life we are creating it, and the struggles that we face throughout our life always threaten to destroy our "creation." As this is happening, we are desperately clinging to it and trying to hold on to what it is that we have made and hope that the storm will pass soon. There are times when the storm is too strong though and that which we have created is gone, but just like the spider we can work to create something new.

bridge
at both ends
mist

Swede, *Terebess Asia Online*

This haiku was my favorite that I was able to find on this website. When I read this haiku, I was reminded of a crossroad but with a twist. Typically, when we reach a crossroad, we have an idea of where it is we will end up, the only thing we have to do is decide which path to take depending on the desired outcome. Here we have a bridge that is covered by mist on both ends. This more represents the struggle of being human and having to make choices than a typical crossroad does. When there are multiple choices to make in life, we do not always know what the result of that choice will be when we make it. This uncertainty is represented by the mist on both sides of the bridge. No matter which end of the bridge you make your way towards, you are not sure what is waiting for you when you get there. That uncertainty is more realistic to the uncertainty that is living life as a human.

George Swede and his haiku are very deep to me in a way that is different from other haiku I have read. Most haiku I have read have roots in what we see in the real world around us when we look at it with our eyes. Swede's haikus really made me think on a deeper level to really understand the inner working of the mind while using things that can be observed in the world around us to represent these workings of the inner human mind. It was fun to find these meanings while doing more digging into his haiku.

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