

Ruth Yarrow: Romanticizing Nature

by
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Ruth Yarrow's *Lit from Within* is a collection of haiku and paintings that depict her life. In many of the poems throughout the book, Yarrow incorporates the beauty of nature to provide sensory details of important moments in her life. Yarrow is an environmentalist and the haiku within this book are written from that perspective. The most interesting aspect of her poems within this collection is her use of romanticism and moderately fantastical imagery. In every poem constructed, Yarrow emphasizes certain aspects of the image in order to make the haiku clearer to the reader. By doing this, the reader is able to visualize what was intended by Yarrow.

evening
our paddles drip
into liquid sunset

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 63

In this haiku, it is easy to see the way Yarrow sets a scene indirectly by making it more romanticized. She first states the time of day, evening. This allows the reader to visualize a dark sky, no matter what the setting is. In the second line, she mentions paddles dripping. This moves the scene onto a body of water, I see a lake, and introduces a couple in a boat, paddling slowly around. She indirectly mentions the water by stating "drip" and "paddles." The last line completes the scene by allowing the reader to visualize a beautiful sunset. Instead of it being in the sky, it is set in the reflection of the water. Yarrow creates a fantastical image of a liquid sunset, which makes it easier for the reader to picture what she intended.

his remark
she scrubs the counter
in tighter circles

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 80

This is another example of how Yarrow indirectly creates a vivid image in the reader's mind. She introduces a man who makes a remark and then mentions a woman scrubbing a counter. Immediately, the reader is taken back in time to around the 1950s where a housewife is scrubbing the counter as her husband is telling her something, I heard "you missed a spot." Then, she scrubs in tighter circles, which nonverbally shows anger. I could visualize the apron from the patriarchal era of the 50s, which created an even more vivid image. In this haiku, the reader can see how Yarrow makes romanticized references to commonly known scenes, this particular one may have been seen in television shows or older movies, while still creating a feeling of anger.

his and her scarecrows
stand tall—
old couple weeding

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 51

In this haiku, Yarrow uses personification to relay the image in the reader's mind. She starts by describing the scarecrows, so the scene is set in a garden. She goes further to describe that they are placed on poles, by saying they are standing tall. The final line ties it all together by introducing a relationship between an older couple. This haiku is an example of one of the many instances in which Yarrow describes a relationship and

relates it to nature. I would consider the scarecrows, although human-made, to be a part of a garden. She turns this image of an inanimate garden into an animated couple weeding. By personifying the scarecrows, Yarrow sticks to her concept of using nature to form a vivid image.

touching the fossil—
low rumblings
of thunder

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 36

In some of Yarrow's haiku, she describes scenes that are what the reader would expect in a circumstance due to media portrayal. For example, in the above haiku, she describes a scene that the reader would expect given the fact that the person in this poem is touching a fossil. In many movies in which fossilized remains are involved, there is typically a storm occurring. In this, the low rumblings of thunder are what would describe the storm. Personally, I think of Jurassic Park because of the depiction of fossils. Therefore, I see an image of an archaeologist discovering fossils, but then thunder rumbles, making the scene more tense than before. Although, I do think this scene occurred in Yarrow's life, it is definitely more romanticized in this haiku than what probably happened.

moonlit clouds
over the native graveyard—
our feet deep into moss

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 128

This haiku starts with a depiction of the setting, nightfall with the moonlighting the sky. Then, she describes a more vivid image, adding the graveyard to the night setting. She then adds a physical touch feeling to the poem by stating that their feet are deep into moss. This is another example of how, in Yarrow's haiku, there is an image that is what would be expected of an archaeologist in a movie. This haiku reminds me of scenes from *Pet Sematary* or *Indiana Jones*. In both of these movies, similar scenes can be viewed where there is a green, mossy setting in the night. I think it is a common perception of archaeology because it is engrained in the media that depicts this field. Yarrow plays off of this romanticization by describing what she does in a way that is relatable to the readers that may not be able to see an actual depiction of what they do.

cloud forest—
a hatch of tiny spiders
dangling

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 72

Yarrow creates a fantasy of a common fear among potential readers. She describes a "cloud forest," which places a beautiful and natural image into the readers head. She then adds another element of "tiny spiders," which may make the reader weary because a spider is not typically considered something that is pretty. Then, she ties it into the beautiful imagery by stating that the hatch of spiders are simply "dangling." This allows the reader to place aside fear and create a fantasy of a forest with spiders dangling throughout it. This haiku gives another example of how Yarrow can take a natural image and create a fantastical image in order to portray a vivid image to the reader.

against the night sky
the curved shape of an owl
my mitten in yours

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 148

In this haiku, Yarrow again creates a scene in which a natural image is introduced and then is romanticized using, in this case, a romantic couple. She first places the reader in the setting of the night. Then, adds an owl to the picture. This is not just an owl, she uses a graceful image of a “curved shape” of the owl, which makes it seem peaceful. This could have easily gone another way if she would have not used the graceful terminology. This scene could have seemed scarier if she didn’t choose this wording. She ends with “my mitten in yours,” which adds another sense of touch to the poem. This ending phrase indicates that a couple is having a romantic evening together, which creates an even more beautiful image in the reader’s mind.

dawn spreads
between the curtains—
your thigh behind mine

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 25

In this haiku, Yarrow personifies the dawn while using curtain-imagery. She says that the dawn “spreads,” which is what a person would normally do to open the curtains. She then switches from the imagery of nature, dawn, to a romantic couple once again. This is a common occurrence for many of her haiku. In the last line, similar to the previous haiku, she leaves the reader with a sense of touch behind their thigh. This is an intimate image of a couple waking up at sunrise with one’s thigh behind the other. This haiku is a great example of how she adds a romantic image to a natural one.

high tide
closes over the rock—
our goodbye

Yarrow, *Lit from Within*, 105

This haiku seems appropriate to end with because of the last line “our goodbye.” However, it does give another example of how Yarrow counters nature with a romantic encounter. She begins with “high tide,” which has an anxious annotation, which is extended by stating that the tide “closes over the rock.” There is then a pause in the poem. This allows the reader to reflect on what has already been presented. The last line introduces a couple who is leaving each other. Unlike similar haiku by Yarrow, this does not have a peaceful image. Rather, it induces a ferocious image of a wave crashing over a rock. However, somehow, due to the break in the poem, it ends on a peaceful note. Both people are accepting of this “goodbye,” which leaves the reader with a sense of resolution. One could also view the wave crashing down as the goodbye. In this case, the entire poem would be considered unsettling.

In these selected haiku, Yarrow instruments different techniques to meet the same conclusion, to romanticize nature. One method she uses is to reference pop culture and media representations of certain situations to make a more generalized image of what she has experienced. For example, when she was studying fossils, she wrote a haiku that could be expected from a general audience based on a movie reference. The low rumblings of thunder with a fossil discovery is common in any movies depicting such discoveries. Although this could have not been Yarrow’s intention, this was a clear scene that I imagined upon reading this haiku.

Another method she uses is creating a natural image in the reader’s mind and then adding a romantic relationship for them to compare it to. In many of Yarrow’s haiku, she first introduces a natural image, such as the night sky, dawn, or a garden with scarecrows, and then presents another depiction of a romantic couple, such as an old couple weeding, a couple sharing an intimate connection, or a couple holding hands. The final technique that Yarrow uses is adding a fantastical word or phrase that brings a playful tone to the poem. One example of this is in the use of the term “dangling” in the haiku on page 72 of *Lit from Within*. This term creates a playful and, somewhat, fantastical image of a spider in the reader’s mind.

Another example of this method is when Yarrow creates an image of paddles “dripping” into “liquid sunset.” These tactics that Yarrow instruments allow for a unique approach to haiku writing. Yarrow, being an environmentalist, knows how to discuss nature in a way that allows the reader, who may not see it the way she does, to experience what she experiences.

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Work Cited

Yarrow, Ruth. *Lit from within: Haiku and Paintings*. Red Moon Press, 2016.