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Chrysanthemum: The Connecting of Nature, Culture, and Language

When exploring authors and topics for my haiku reader response essay, I stumbled upon the online haiku magazine, *Chrysanthemum*. The name of the magazine, which is what sparked my interest in reading it, is unique and carefully chosen. As the website explains, “Chrysanthemum was originally a Latin word (the same in German & English) that emphasized the connection of the ancient Greek-Roman tradition to the Japanese. The chrysanthemum is known as one of the Four Noble Plants in the Chinese-Japanese tradition” (Chrysanthemum). The name highlights the overall goal of the online magazine: to connect cultures. The haiku included in *Chrysanthemum* connect Japanese, English, and German culture. The magazine itself is German based, but each haiku includes both an English and German translation.

I was drawn to the magazine for its German roots and translations. I spent four years in high school learning German and also spent a summer abroad living with a German family. The German language is special to me and I have always enjoyed the style of the language. In German, one word can include multiple ideas, feelings, or senses, which cannot be done in the English language. All of the selected haiku from *Chrysanthemum*, *Chrysanthemum* 28 specifically, have a German word like that in it, often being in a line of its own. In the following reading responses to selected *Chrysanthemum* 28 haiku, I will be explaining what I see, feel, hear, or remember from the haiku, as well as an analysis of how the English translation compares to the German translation.

smell of coffee
 and everything
 seems different

kaffeeduft
 und alles
 scheint anders

Gregor Graf, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 21

Reading this haiku by Gregor Graf (*Chrysanthemum* 28 21), I picture an early morning. I did not want to wake up and so I had to drag myself out of bed. Everything seems dark and dull. Then, all of a sudden, the distinct smell of coffee brewing hits me. There is no greater feeling than when the coffee is already brewing as you wake up. Waking up to that smell and being able to roll out of bed right to the pot is magical. Like the haiku says, everything seems different, just the bitter smell of coffee alone wakes me up. What once before seemed fuzzy and groggy, now seems brighter and full of energy. Everything changes from that one smell and the day seems bearable. Better than that, I feel invincible.

What is interesting about the language comparison in the translations of these haiku is the way the “smell of coffee” is written. The German word, *kaffeeduft*, encapsulates the smell of coffee into a

single word. It is essentially a compound word. I am not sure if they are called compound words in German, but that is what we would call it in English. *Kaffee* means coffee and *duft* means scent. It quite literally translates to coffee scent, but in the German language, the two words can be stuck together. That word alone allows me, and other readers to envision the smell of coffee coming to my nose. What is captured in three English words can be explained in a single German word. I like the rhythm that *kaffeeduft* gives to the German translation of the haiku, each line is two syllables which gives it a more distinct, concise flow.

sound of cicadas
among the fireflies
hidden moon

Zikadengesang
zwischen den Glühwürmchen
versteckt der Mond

Nick Gutetierrez, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 22

This haiku by Nick Gutetierrez (*Chrysanthemum* 28 page 22) has both visual and auditory cues. With the first line, not only do I hear the collective hum of cicadas, but it also makes me picture a summer night, as that is when cicadas are more commonly heard. This feeling of summer is continued into the second line of the haiku, "among the fireflies." Like cicadas, fireflies are most often associated with summer. The second and third line also give the image of nighttime. Overall, I picture a summer night hanging out with my family outside. The gentle chorus of cicadas is ever present as we admire the soft glow of the lightning bugs. The first two sensory lines work perfectly together and are pulled together through the last line.

Much like the previous haiku, the German translation of this haiku contains a compound German word. *Zikadengesang* is the sound that a cicada makes. The word can be broken into two parts, *zikaden* and *gesang*. *Zikaden* means cicada, and *gesang* means song or singing. In my opinion, "cicada song" has a clearer auditory sound than the "sound of cicadas." It is more poetic and gives more of an explanation as to what the cicadas sound like. This is especially helpful when writing haiku for an international audience, as not all readers will understand the sound of cicadas. When the poem is translated to English, it loses that distinct idea of a song.

night on the sea...
the waxing moon rides
a huge wave

nachts auf See ...
der zunehmende Mond reitet
einen Wellenriesen

Srinivas Sampath Kumar, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 30

The first line of this haiku by Srinivas Sampath Kumar (*Chrysanthemum* 28 page 30) gives a clear image. I can see the almost-black waves crashing through the dark sky breaking the silence of the night. That image and sound stays with you for a second as the first line is followed by an ellipsis.

The first image is juxtaposed with the image of the waxing moon, large and white. The bright image of the moon is completely contrasting the dark image of the waves and night. The moon is then personified to be “riding” a huge wave. I think the ellipsis is meant to almost be a settled quiet before the “huge” wave comes with the moon riding on it.

The word I want to focus on in this haiku is *welleneriesen*. *Wellenriesen* is also a “compound” word, but it is a less direct compound word. *Wellen* can mean a few things, it can mean corrugations, ripple, or surf. *Riesen* translates to grand, giant, or huge. While it does not directly translate to “huge wave,” as it is written in the English translation of the haiku, when the two parts are put together, they create the same image. What I find interesting about these words in general is that water is not a part of the English or German translation. In English, wave can either refer to the ocean or to the hand gesture. In German, *wellen* seems to be more targeted at the water aspect, but it is not directly mentioned. But, when put in context with the rest of the haiku, we can see the “huge wave” coming towards the beach as the moon rides it.

a girl
pirouetting alone
in the cherry blossom rain
as if tomorrow
has yet to find her

ein Mädchen
dreht Pirouetten allein
im Kirschblütenregen
als ob ein Morgen
sie noch vorfinden müßte

Chen-ou Liu, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 31

This haiku by Chen-ou Liu (*Chrysanthemum* 28 page 31), which is longer than most haiku you see, has such a distinct image. I can see the girl turning through her pirouettes while beautiful, pink flowers fall around her. The juxtaposition of the falling and the turning is almost chaotic, but also gentle and serene. I like how the author uses the term “cherry blossom rain.” It really puts into perspective how many and how fast the flowers are falling. I also enjoy how the author makes the point to mention that she is dancing alone. She is not performing for anyone or trying to show off, she is just dancing in the moment. In that moment, she feels infinite or as the last two lines state, “as if tomorrow has yet to find her.” It is almost as if time freezes and all that moves are her and flowers.

The word that sticks out to me in the German translation of this haiku is *Kirschblütenregen*. This word is kind of a compound word. I say kind of because it is a combination of three different German words, something that does not have a name and does not exist in the English language. *Kirsch* translates to cherry, *blüten* translates to blossom, and *regen* translates to rain. Altogether it is quite a mouthful, but it perfectly conveys that image the author, Chen-ou Liu is trying to show. I think this word is quite unique and also beautiful. I love the image of the raining cherry blossom flowers and I think it is so cool that the German language can combine that into one word, one image, and one feeling. I definitely think the line with *Kirschblütenregen* brings together the entire haiku and gives it its tone.

melanoma
 the wings of a butterfly
 leaning against the rock

Melanom
 Schmetterlingsflügel
 an einen Fels gelehnt

Carmela Marino, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 33

I love this haiku by Carmela Marino (*Chrysanthemum* 28 page 33). While I do not fully understand the exact message or image that Marino was trying to share, from what I took away, I really liked this haiku. The way I read it is that someone is trying to find the happiness in their sickness. Melanoma is a skin cancer (I did have to do some research on it after reading this haiku) which results in small brownish spots on the skin. I see someone looking at their melanoma spots and seeing what shapes they can find in it, like when you look at clouds and say what shape they look like. What this person sees is “the wings of a butterfly leaning against the rock,” as the last two lines state. I find this so beautiful. The idea of trying to find happiness or beauty from a scary or sad situation is so hard, but it is so beautiful to see. This haiku portrays that perfectly.

Schmetterlingsflügel, an extremely long word, is translated from “the wings of a butterfly.” This German word is composed of two parts, *Schmetterling*, which translates to butterfly and *flügel*, which translates to wings, so together it is just butterfly’s wings. This is one haiku where I actually like the English translation better. To me, “the wings of a butterfly” sounds more poetic than the German “butterfly’s wings.” The spacing of the English version slows down the haiku and gives readers more time to process the image that is being shown. Do not get me wrong, it is so cool that German can bring that image into one word, but for the purposes of the haiku, I think the English translation works better.

small town loneliness
 I follow the route
 he walked each day

Kleinstadteinsamkeit
 ich folge dem Weg
 den er jeden Tag ging

Peter Newton, *Chrysanthemum* 28, 37

This haiku by Peter Newton (*Chrysanthemum* 28 page 37) has such a clear voice and tone throughout all three lines. The first line alone, “small town loneliness,” has so much to pack. As someone from a small town, I can definitely relate to that feeling. Not only are there not a lot of people, which means friends, around, but there is not a lot of fun activities or bustling city life. Small towns are quiet, which can be both peaceful and lonely at the same time. Personally, I thrive off of social interactions, so small-town life has been lonely for me at times. The next two lines, which flow together, bring the whole haiku into perspective. “I follow the route he walked each day.” These, which generally leave room for a lot of interpretation, continue the lonely,

solemn tone of the first line. In my mind, the author is following the route of a loved one who has passed, maybe the father, brother, grandfather. In following their route, the loss, loneliness, and pain is strengthened and seems all-consuming. Paired with the initial idea of small-town loneliness really shows the desolate state of the subject.

The German word that stuck out to me can be found in the first line of the haiku. The word is *Kleinstadteinsamkeit*. This is another triple compound word. Klein translates to small, *stadt* translates to city or town, and *einsamkeit* translates to loneliness. Although it is not typically thought in this way, *einsamkeit* is almost a compound word in itself. *Eins* is the number one and *amkeit* translates to amity, which means friend. While it is not typically thought as a compound word, *einsamkeit*, meaning lonely, can be broken into “one friend.” I think *Kleinstadteinsamkeit* is perfectly fitting for this haiku. One word is lonelier than three and having one word that carries that meaning adds so much to the haiku. It even more so drills home that feeling of being alone that is used throughout the entire haiku.

Overall, I really enjoy getting to bring out my German skills when reading these haiku from *Chrysanthemum* 28. The website ReversoContext, as cited in the works cited, was a huge help in breaking down the meanings of the German compound words and helping me decipher the complex meanings of them. While I did spend four years learning German, today my German skills are a little rusty. To this day, it still fascinates me how, in the German language, you can just add as many words together as you like. It was especially cool to see how those words can be used in the context of haiku.

The theme of *Chrysanthemum*, in both the magazine overall and in the ones I selected, seems to be nature, authenticity, and human emotion. The haiku included were definitely fitting for the nature-y title of the magazine. Like mentioned in the introduction and the on the website, *Chrysanthemum* is meant to be about connecting different cultures. I could definitely see that ideal at work. From the Japanese symbolism of the cherry blossom to the American symbolism of cicadas and fireflies to the translations in German and English, and even some in Italian and Portuguese, the haiku displayed a wide range of cultures. The connection between culture and nature is so pure and interesting to me. Nature may look a little different in each culture, but we view it the same. Nature is the source, it is a symbol of birth, growth, and change. It is something that we can all relate to. It is beautiful, emotional, and raw. I think all of these selected haiku capture that theme perfectly. *Chrysanthemum* as a whole captured that theme perfectly.

Works Cited

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