

Kaitlin Hathaway
 Dr. Brooks
 Global Haiku
 Reader Response Essay

George Swede's Haiku

Over the course of the semester, I have been introduced to many times of haiku that range from Millikin's student's haikus all the way to Japanese haiku. The author that has stuck out to me most this semester is George Swede. I appreciated how raw and real his haiku felt, but what was the most important aspect for me is his ability to not choose a judgmental perspective. He writes about real world scenarios that most authors tend to shy away from, but he does it in a way that does not place blame on a certain individual or group of people. It is up to the reader to create their own perspective on the haiku.

George Swede has had a lot of experience writing poetry. He began writing poetry as a free-verse poet. After he was asked to review a haiku anthology, he began to write his own haiku. Swede in his essay *Tracks in the Sand* said this about writing haiku, "I learned that it was possible to write objectively about everyday experience without serious intrusions of the ego. Such work was a tonic for someone grown weary of reading about personal obsessions, including those in my own work." (Swede, 2008-2009). Swede writes here that he does not put the personal objective into his haiku. I like to believe he does this because he feels that it is not his place to judge others on what they do with their lives, and I appreciate that he does that. That is what draws me to his haikus. I do not like to judge others, because I have always been taught by my mother that we never know what is happening to someone in their personal lives that we cannot see, so we do not have any place to judge them. I took that idea with me when reading Swede's haiku, because I think that is a message that he is trying to portray in his haiku. I enjoy this take on haiku especially because society today is judgmental. Social media has created this culture where we are always put on a platform that is constantly being judged by everyone. It is hard to not feel as though we are being judged in every aspect of our lives, so to read haiku about real-world scenarios that do not include a judgmental perspective is calming.

stepping on
 sidewalk ants the boy
 everyone bullies

Swede, *AU*, page 2

This a great example of Swede's use of perspective in his haiku. The haiku features a boy, who we know is being bullied, stepping on ants. We can assume that the boy is stepping on the ants because he feels inferior himself, and stepping on the small, innocent ants makes him feel superior. We must remember though that Swede did not tell us that specifically in the haiku is that is the reason the boy is stepping on the ants. The boy could have stepped on the ants purely because he did not realize that the ant hill was there and did not mean to step on them at all. He could he stepping on them on purpose, but that is for us as the readers to decide. Swede is not also putting any judgement on the boy for stepping on the ants. This is how he writes haiku. He does not want to push his judgement onto the reader because that takes away our own interpretation of the haiku. I enjoy this haiku personally because I see it in the way of the boy stepping on the ants because he feels inferior in life. It reminds me of the cycle of bullying. Someone makes another person feel inferior to them, therefore, that person who now feels inferior will go and make someone else feel inferior to make themselves feel superior again. It is one of the main reasons there are bullies to begin with, so Swede writing this creates the illusion of a boy who wants to feel inferior but cannot. He could be being bullied at school, home, or with friends. We do not know that though because Swede doesn't

specifically tell us. He doesn't want to judge the boy, which is why he doesn't tell us the boy's reasoning for stepping on the ant pile. It is what makes this haiku so great.

after the abortion
she weeds
the garden

Swede, *AU*, page 54

I enjoy this haiku by Swede a lot because of the way it portrays abortion. In pop culture, it is often said that an abortion is an event that makes someone feel sad afterwards, and often they will fall into this depressive episode. I find that point of view to be subjective because it says that women should feel sad and guilty after getting an abortion.

Swede writes the haiku without the subjective perspective of a man. I can always tell in television shows, movies, books, etc. when a female character is written by a man because of certain characteristics of the character. I expected there to be a male perspective about abortion when reading the haiku, but there is not. Swede keeps the trend of writing haiku without a judgmental perspective even about serious topics such as abortion. That is why I enjoy this haiku so much. It does not place blame on the female for getting an abortion, and it does not write it in a way that could be subjective to women. It writes it as a common event that should not be made into a controversy.

in the pawnshop window
a hooker studies
her reflection

Swede, *AU*, page 70

Besides just not creating a judgmental perspective in his haiku, which Swede also does in this haiku, he also creates haiku that have many layers to them. When first reading this haiku, I pictured a hooker studying her reflection in a window. I could see the imagery Swede was trying to invoke, but once I re-read the haiku, I thought about Swede's use of a pawnshop window. The hooker could have been looking in any window, but Swede purposely used a pawnshop. I believe the pawnshop is supposed to represent the idea of something that might have been used but is still a valuable item. The purpose of a pawnshop is to bring in something that is no longer wanted by someone to be bought by someone else to see the value in it. The hooker could be looking into the pawnshop window representing the way society views sex workers. Swede is hinting at the judgement society has placed onto sex workers and why it could be problematic for them.

Society sees sex workers as "used goods" that are not worth much, but the hooker could see herself in a positive light. She might see herself as someone who has value in herself, because she does not care about how society sees her. It only matters how she sees herself. This haiku has these deep layers that reflect Swede's choice of not including a judgmental perspective in his haiku. It reminds the readers to not judge sex workers, because it does not matter how we see them, it only matters how they see themselves. They do not need us to judge them, because they're just making money like the rest of us are, just not in a traditional sense.

under the dirty,
one-eyed hen a perfect
white egg

Swede, *AU*, page 65

This haiku goes along with the one mentioned previously as it has the same layered meaning behind it. At first glance, someone would not expect the hen who has all of these problems to be able to lay a good egg because of their judgement. It is not until after the hen lays a perfect white egg that the hen is valued and appreciated for its worth. This haiku gives the lesson that we should not judge someone based on their looks. As the saying goes, “don’t judge a book by its cover” because when someone does, they might miss the value that is offered inside. If we judge someone’s worth based off their looks, we might miss out on getting to know some great people for who they truly are.

This haiku and lesson relate to society and of how judgmental it is. Social media has created this culture where looks are even more important to someone than anything else, especially to young people. Society has created this mentality that someone has to be pretty to have worth, which is entirely not true. Swede is writing about this and is giving the reader a message, that people should not be judged based on their looks, because that is not the source of their worth, instead it is what comes from inside.

streetwalker
with a black eye halo
around the moon

Swede, *AU*, page 67

This haiku is one of my favorites by Swede, not because of a deeper meaning, but of the beautiful imagery. The last two lines “with a black halo / around the moon” brings an image to my mind of the moon surrounded by the night sky and plenty of stars to help it shine across the sky. Another way to look at the last two lines is that the moon is the streetwalker’s eye. We know that the streetwalker does have a black eye, but if it is represented by this image of the moon, it symbolizes the beauty of the streetwalker’s eye. The imagery of this haiku is what makes it so special, it does not have to have a deeper meaning for this to be a favorite of mine.

leaving my loneliness inside her

Swede, *AU*, page 79

This haiku is another that has a deeper meaning without showing any judgement. Swede does not tell the reader why the narrator is sleeping with this girl. Without giving much context, it tells the reader to reflect at our own selves and determine why we think they are sleeping with this girl that they must not care much about. This person could be going through a breakup, they could be depressed, or they might not want a relationship. It should not matter to the reader why the narrator is doing it, because it is not the reader’s place to judge them. Swede leaves out the context of the situation because it would inflict judgment. It ties in with the rest of his haiku for this reason.

I enjoy this haiku because of how real it is. I was taken back by this haiku when I first read it. This haiku though makes me think of how different girls and guys are when they go through a breakup. People say that they experience a breakup differently. Girls go through the emotional healing stage of the breakup first. Typically, they are sad for a while and then start to feel better after they have handled their emotions. Guys on the other hand will party and sleep around sometimes with other girls so suppress their emotions because they do not want to deal with the emotional baggage that follows a breakup. They will do this for a while in a way to move on from the person they were with. By the time the guy has come to face his emotions from the breakup, the girl has already healed herself. It is an unhealthy way to heal, but many men do it this way. It shows how different the two genders are when it comes to a breakup, and that is why I liked it. I found it to be a real situation that I could connect to my life.

still on the bookshelf
the mother-in-law's finger line
through the dust

Swede, AU, page 73

Swede stays on the trend of judgment with this haiku. It does not seem like the readers are left with the question of judgment in this haiku, because the mother-in-law is providing enough judgment for everyone. I enjoy this haiku personally because of how comical it is. There are always stories of people having terrible mothers-in-law whether it be in real life or in pop culture. I could see someone's mother-in-law being so petty that she is trying to find something wrong with the house just so she can make a big deal about it.

The mother-in-law is seeking out an issue just so that she can judge, which could represent the readers in Swede's other haikus. By him not putting in his own personal perspective on these scenarios, he is allowing the reader to reflect on themselves. To ask themselves the question as to whether or not they will choose to judge the person like society says to do, or to realize that we don't know what is going on in that person's life, therefore; we have no reason to judge them and how they choose to spend their time.

Works Cited:

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