

Global Haiku Spring 2022

Reader Response essay: Ellen Compton

by Amanda Handegan
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The more I researched Ellen Compton, a freelance writer and award-winning haiku poet from the United States, I realized even more why I was so drawn to her haiku writing process. Compton is the author of *Gathering Dusk* (a haiku collection that received a Snapshot Press Book Award), was a founding member of Towpath haiku society, and was on the editorial staff of the Red Moon Anthology. Compton had a background in visual and theatre arts and spent most of her time near woods and meadows, and on the Chesapeake shore. Her approach to haiku involved a lot of inspiration from Japanese masters who introduced her to concepts like linked verse, nengayju, and “worldlessness” which she described as the “spaces around the words” along with many other introspective shaping theories (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022). Compton’s theatre background is evident in the essence of her haiku. I resonated with her process because of her use of rhythm, subtext, and intention. These aspects of her writing are extremely harmonious with my own which immediately connected me to her work. While analyzing her process I found that the techniques she used were feeling-based and presented her haiku in an abstract way. The combination of her own background and the lessons she learned from many Japanese masters aided her beautifully in her unique creation of haiku. The following examples of Compton’s work highlight her own style, some in the Japanese structure, and some using writing techniques from her Japanese mentors.

second star
the wish i should have made
on the first one

Compton, *Pocket Change*, 2000

This haiku entitled “second star”: Included in “pocket change: towpath Haiku Society 2000” (1999 towpath anthology) by Ellen Compton is a great example of the meaningful essence of her haiku. One event that really influenced Ellen’s artistry was the 1997 Japan-USA haiku conference in Tokyo. The leader, master Yatsuka Ishihara, spoke about “telling the truth as if it were a lie” when creating haiku. Yatsuka Ishihara believes that “...it is crucial for haiku to tell the truth as if it were false. This false nature of haiku expression is the essence of haiku. . . The first line of a poem comes from heaven. Coming from heaven means inspiration or fiction. Haiku itself is the first line of a poem. This proposition applies to my theory [of] ‘introspective shaping’. . . Our reality is in our chest. So, instead of looking out at the world, we look with a pair of ‘haiku glasses’ into our chest, where the landscape of truth exists” (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022). This idea relates to the subtext or what’s underneath a haiku. The first line in this haiku is “second star”, which according to this theory comes from heaven and gives inspiration to the reader. Compton related what “comes from heaven” with what we experience through our senses, memory, and imagination. What is at the core of this haiku is the second chance that is given to this person with the “second star”. It includes the sense of sight, the memory of the first star, and imagining the new wish. This haiku gives the audience that feeling of hope that comes with seeing the star, closing your eyes, and wishing upon it without it having to

say any of that. The audience does not know the wish, nor does it need to. There is still some mystery left. What is at the core of this haiku is the history of the first wish and getting a second chance. That is what gives the audience the essence of “telling the truth as if it were a lie”. In my own writing process I have had a similar approach that has helped me capture this same essence. In other words, I have always approached my haiku like a secret. I believe that this approach of telling the truth in haiku, but layering it with a secretive and almost coy approach creates unforgettable haiku. This poem is another vibrant display of these techniques:

sifting pebbles
my fingers pause to read
the broken one

Compton, *Woodnotes*, 27

This next haiku contains the same key elements of senses, memory, and imagination. It uses the senses sight and touch to evoke a very relatable memory for the audience. Personally, this haiku reminded me of collecting seashells on the beach and coming across a beautiful broken one and taking the briefest moment to mourn for it. Although this haiku is describing a pretty unenthusiastic universal experience, there is much more substance to it than what is written. It is full of subtext which allows the imagination to roam and sets the tone for what is truly underneath this haiku. For example, what is not being said is how she noticed the odd ball out, stopped digging, and ran her thumb across the broken edges, “reading” the pebble’s story of how it broke. If one were to look at this haiku through “haiku glasses” (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022), they would see the simple, but heartbreaking landscape of truth that this experience is describing. Now consider this next poem:

kaleidoscope
the little sound of a star
shattering

Compton, *Modern Haiku*, 1992

This haiku is a perfect example of Compton’s style of work. Emiko Miyashita, a well-established Japanese haiku poet described Compton’s haiku as “...little stars in a kaleidoscope, shattering and shining, creating thousands of images” (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022). The strongest components of this haiku are definitely senses, imagination, and sound. Compton’s decision to use the “sound” of a star shattering to describe the way that the kaleidoscope looks to the eye, which essentially combines the two senses together is a common theme for her. The feeling of awe that we associate with the mental imagery and the sound of a star shattering is the same feeling that the beautiful colors in a kaleidoscope ignite. Compton also forces the reader to stretch their imagination by adding sound as a sense in this haiku. Sound is truly incorporated into this haiku when it is read aloud. For example, the alliteration of “sound of a star shattering” adds the actual gift of sound to support the text. The percussive nature of “shattering” also elevates the image of the colors exploding inside. Reading haiku aloud is one of Compton’s biggest pieces of advice when it comes to the art of haiku. She preached that “Haiku is poetry and poetry is meant to be heard. From the earliest time poems were written for the singer, perhaps accompanied on a lyre or harp. Read aloud to hear the music within the haiku. Listen for the rhythms and gifts of sound. And perhaps you may even notice something you would

want to change or eliminate” (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022). The music within this particular haiku is made evident through her use of senses, imagination, and sound.

Another means of inspiration for Compton was memory and nature. This next haiku highlights her ability to tell a story using those techniques. This haiku still contains the same use of senses and imagination, but what Compton describes as a “glorious afternoon on the open road” is what produced this story. Plus, the feelings that accompany a happy accident living underneath that memory. The way Compton structured this haiku also aids that part of her storytelling. The indentation on the first line implies that missing the turn sign was unexpected and the following line structure is a result of that. This haiku exemplifies her love of nature with the use of memory:

missing the turn sign
 missing the turn
 wild lilies

Compton, Woodnotes, 30

Compton was also known for her work with linked verse, or what she referred to as “the parent of haiku”. She saw haiku as a “social genre” and was very drawn to collaborating with others in the haiku community (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022). This three-line verse is Ellen’s and the capping verse is by poet Carol Purington. Personally, what I enjoy about this verse form is how two completely different tone’s come together to create a compatible story. For example, Compton uses the words “shimmering”, “light”, and “song” which all have a warm connotation. Then, Purington’s verse completely interrupts that tone with “dissonance”, “sudden”, and “rain” which have a very different and potentially uncomfortable vibe. The possibilities that linked verse can create are endless and Compton’s eagerness to allow her art to adapt to another artist's vision is admirable.

shimmering
 through light and shadow
 wind chime song

dissonance
 of sudden rain

Lynx, 16:1, February 2001

Another way Compton got involved with the haiku community was through *nengayju*, a Japanese traditional group in which poets design and make New Year cards and then send them to others in the group. The set of rules she was given for the example below were that the card must include the words *akemashite omedetou gozaimasu*, which is Japanese for Happy New Year along with a haiku by the sender. There also had to be a reference to or image of the zodiac animal for the year, which in this case was the year of the rabbit. Finally, the cards also had to be sent in the mail. As picture below, Compton’s card and work with *nengayju* exhibits all of those requirements and captures her warmth:



(Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022)

Compton's contribution to the community of haiku was extensive. Not only did she bring her own personal style and warmth to every project, but she was continuously opening herself up to the inspiration of others. Her love for nature, Japanese culture, and theatre were infused into her work with such care. Compton highly respected her mentors, collaborators, and masters. Ultimately, her goal was to learn and seek the truth about haiku. Above all, she valued the masters and aimed to "...read their poems often, and read them deep. Read to learn what they were searching for" (Kelsey and Kelsey, 2022).

Works Cited

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