

## Floral Imagery in Haiku

by Gwen Klinkey  
April 14, 2022

Throughout many different kinds of haiku authors find that using floral imagery helps emphasize whatever emotion, event, or point that their haiku is trying to make. By looking at three different categories of haiku—haiku from Japan, haiku from America, and haiku written by members of our own class—readers can see the vast variety of uses and implementation of flowers and other floral imagery and how those different features create different effects.

Japanese haiku use markers to signify different seasons, and although floral imagery is not the only way to create this identification, the nature of specific blooming seasons for flowers serves as an easy way to mark the seasons. In Masajo Suzuki's *Love Haiku*, she uses floral imagery to make many of these distinctions. For example, one such haiku reads:

field of violets—  
like those fallen from grace  
like the two of us

Masajo Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, 32

In this case, Suzuki's use of violets clues the reader into the fact that this haiku is taking place in the springtime, or is supposed to have a springtime energy. While the primary use of violets may be to signify the season, it is also important to note that in Japanese culture violets can represent passion and love which, as the name of her collection suggests, is the focal point for her works included in this book. It is interesting to me that she chooses violets, however, due to the relatively happy connotation that they typically have. The rest of the haiku feels melancholy and almost full of regrets while the symbolism of the violets is all around more happy.

One possible combined reading of these two conflicting emotions also brings in the color of the violets. Eastern and Western society have very different interpretations of most things symbolic. In this haiku, the purple of the violets may represent the time in which the common people in Japan were not allowed to wear bright colors outside of their home and instead often wore them as lining in their apparel (Geeraert). Suzuki had love affairs and from the phrasing of "fallen from grace" it seems as though this haiku is referring to one of those relationships. Mixing all of these ideas together creates a possible interpretation that the love and passion that Suzuki and her lover found in their affair is beautiful and makes her feel young again, like a fresh flower in the spring, but at the same time they know that what they are doing is dishonorable and can't allow themselves to bask in those positive feelings without being heavily aware of the mistakes they are making.

In another of Suzuki's haiku she writes:

cherry blossom chill—  
in the bottom of my chest  
his kimono sash

Masajo Suzuki, *Love Haiku*, 77

Again, the season represented by the flowers is spring which gives us the feeling of rebirth and a new start; however, by adding on the word "chill" the reader is clued into the fact that something might be wrong. Cherry blossoms are a very important symbol in their worship of nature and symbolize both birth and death or beauty and violence (Funk). This duality is almost mirrored in the way that the flowers are mentioned in quick succession with the "chill."

Suzuki was married to a man who died when she was relatively young, for one possible reading of this haiku it can be inferred that the sash that she finds in the trunk is his. Although she is experiencing the turn of a new season and the beauty that comes with it, the discovery of her husband's kimono sash at the bottom of her possessions makes her sad that she has forgotten a piece of the man she loved, yet brings warm and happy memories with it, mirroring both the use of cherry blossoms and the contrast between the flowers and the weather.

In American haiku seasons are less important universally and instead only matter to specific authors in haiku which may require that context. This does not mean, however, that the use of flowers is lessened. Where flowers may have served to symbolize certain seasons in Japanese haiku, the use of flowers in American haiku is often more freeform and provides a more personal touch. Peggy Lyles chooses to use a lot of floral imagery in her haiku. In one she writes:

moving day  
the dogwood tree  
in full white bloom

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 42

This haiku has many levels of reading in regards to the use of floral imagery, just as Suzuki's did. At the surface level readers can assume that this haiku is about the bittersweetness of closing a chapter of your life. The dogwood tree that she speaks about had bloomed reliably every year that she had lived in that house and moving away from it and the happiness that both the house and the tree brought her is bittersweet. On a deeper, more symbolic level, the dogwood tree represents rebirth and the ability to withstand change (P). As the narrator moves from one place to another, they are becoming someone new and adding to their story. They are also powering through a difficult, saddening, and stressful time in their life. Although these two readings are slightly different, the general meaning of the haiku is not lost if the reader doesn't have extensive knowledge of flower language or the symbolism of different plants.

The layering of the meaning of flowers and floral imagery is also featured in other haiku by Peggy Lyles including:

sweet peas  
tremble on the trellis  
the bride's "I will"

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 25

In this haiku the movement of the flowers gives the readers all they would need for a complete reading of the haiku. The trembling provides more depth than just the idea of sweet peas would alone. With a more in depth knowledge of flower language readers would know that while sweet peas may symbolize bliss, they also represent goodbyes (Moulton). Just like the previous haiku, the use of flowers helps the audience understand that the narrator of the story is moving from one chapter of their life to another and might be struggling to do so.

Reading this haiku without knowing what sweet peas symbolize may cause the reader to have the impression that the bride is reluctant to accept the marriage or that she might have been forced into it, but understanding the dual nature of sweet peas may help the audience to understand that while the bride is excited by the prospect of her marriage, it brings a lot of uncertainty and changes that she might not be sure she is ready for. In addition, marriage is one of the biggest changes that can happen in a person's life, so saying goodbye to the person that she was before marriage—not that she's losing her identity, but that her life is combining with another's— is probably terrifying.

While Peggy Lyles seems to be very deliberate in her choice of flower when including them in her haiku and almost appears to be very cognizant in their ulterior meanings, Aubrie Cox uses flowers as a more situational symbol instead of relying on flower language. One of Cox's haiku that uses floral imagery in this way reads:

wilted lilacs . . .  
your hand  
slips from mine

Aubrie Cox, *Tea's Aftertaste*, 15

Instead of the atmosphere surrounding lilacs being the focus on the haiku, the actions of the lilacs take center stage. Anyone who has experienced lilacs personally will know that they are incredibly fickle. Almost as soon as they are picked they begin to lose their flowers. With common knowledge about lilacs, readers can see the fickle and quick nature of the relationship being described by Cox in the rest of her haiku. While there may also be some alternative personal meaning to the lilacs that Cox's audience will never be able to know, the use of lilacs still accomplishes what it needs to through a universal understanding of the plant.

Students learning how to write haiku in our class this semester have also used floral imagery. Like Aubrie Cox, they seem to rely more on their personal relationship with flowers rather than any other previously established meaning. One haiku from our second Kukai reads:

wilted roses  
fall  
from Juliet's balcony

Emma Antonelli, *Kukai 2*, 1

This haiku seems to lean more heavily on the actions of the roses rather than their meaning. The romantic inclinations of roses are of course acknowledged, but seem to almost blend in with the atmosphere provided by the mention of *Romeo and Juliet*. The wilting of the roses informs readers that something is withering away, just like in Aubrey Cox's haiku. The idea of watching not only the beauty of the roses fade, but then fall off the edge of such an iconic balcony really cultivates a sense of desolation and heartbreak. Here Antonelli twists what readers expect from a haiku including *Romeo and Juliet* and roses and uses the movement and change of the flowers to communicate something entirely different than the normal romance or love haiku.

Similarly, in another one of Antonelli's haiku she writes:

wilted wild flowers  
over grow  
the play house

Emma Antonelli, *Kukai 3*, 90

Just like the previous haiku, the type of flower adds limited meaning to the haiku and what meaning it does add comes only from the fact that the flowers are unplanned and unexpected. What the flowers do add to the energy of this haiku is emotion. While the mention of a playhouse might have the potential to carry heavy emotion, it needs a catalyst for that emotion to come to fruition. By adding the movement and aspect of the wildflowers taking over the playhouse a simple object becomes a loaded emotional gun. By capitalizing on an object that has a lot of nostalgia and the potential for eliciting an emotional response and using flowers to mark the passage of time Antonelli doesn't need more in depth symbolism or explanation for the way in which she chooses to include flowers in her haiku.

Continuing the theme of using the action of natural imagery, while this haiku by Nick Canton may not be floral imagery in particular, the way in which Canton chooses to position and use the cypress trees in his haiku fall in line with many of the other haiku:

deep-rooted cypress trees  
bowing down  
in front of the cathedral

Nick Canton, *Kukai 5*, 38

Again, just like the previous haiku, Canton centers his work around something that has a lot of loaded meaning, in this case the idea of religion, a higher being, and divine work. Nature is often thought of as an unstoppable force, so contrasting it with religion creates a sort of unstoppable object/immovable force-type relationship that is truly captivating. What's more, Canton chooses a tree that is often thought of as

monumental and imposing without further knowledge on the deeper meaning of these trees. By using those universal thoughts and feelings, the movement of the trees brings a sense of majesty and earth-moving importance to whatever they are bowing down for.

All this is not to say, however, that students in our class do not use floral imagery in similar ways to Japanese and other American authors. In another haiku by Antonelli, she writes:

chrysanthemum covered swing  
life and death  
sit together

Emma Antonelli, *Kukai 5, 7*

In this haiku, rather than choosing a nondescript wildflower or another flower that blends in with the rest of the emotional markers in the poem, Antonelli makes a very specific choice in including the chrysanthemum. Like in Lyles' haiku there may be a personal meaning to this that the audience could never know, but in regards to flower symbolism, the chrysanthemum spans a wide variety of meanings depending on the color, and since no color is specified in the haiku, it is reasonable to think that there may be many colors, bringing all of the different meanings together. Chrysanthemums can symbolize many things, from passion to neglected love to longevity and are used in many other countries like Belgium and Austria as a memorial flower for loved ones to be placed on their graves (Fresh). The fact that the different meanings of the chrysanthemum fall in so nicely with the rest of the context of the haiku makes it seem as if Antonelli did this intentionally and plays into a deeper and more comprehensive use of floral imagery in student's haiku.

All three of the categories discussed have their merits. Japanese haiku often using floral imagery as a signal for a specific season allows a whole slew of emotions to be included in such a small amount of writing. American haiku using their Western symbolism to communicate obvious and more underlying messages gives layers to haiku that would not otherwise be possible in such a compact form of writing. The authors and haiku written in our class using movement and more emotional appeals with their implementation of flower language provides an even playing field for readers with any knowledge level of flowers and floral symbolism. Each has their merits and provide such different aspects to the art and writing of haiku that it is impossible to say which is the best, but using floral imagery in any form provides deeper attachment for the reader experiencing the haiku.

## Works Cited

- Cox, Aubrey. *Tea's Aftertaste*. *Bronze Man Books*, 2011.
- Fresh, FTD. "Chrysanthemum Meaning and Symbolism." *FTD.com*, 16 Nov. 2016, <https://www.ftd.com/blog/share/chrysanthemum-meaning-and-symbolism>.
- Funk, Brian. "Cherry Trees in Japanese Folklore." *Brooklyn Botanic Garden*, 25 Apr. 2016, [https://www.bbg.org/news/cherry\\_trees\\_in\\_japanese\\_folklore#:~:text=Cherry%20blossoms%20symbolize%20both%20birth,pilots%20during%20World%20War%20II](https://www.bbg.org/news/cherry_trees_in_japanese_folklore#:~:text=Cherry%20blossoms%20symbolize%20both%20birth,pilots%20during%20World%20War%20II).
- Geeraert, Amélie. "Traditional Meanings of Colors in Japanese Culture." *Kokoro Media*, 15 June 2020, <https://kokoro-jp.com/culture/298/>.
- Antonelli, Emma, et al. "Kukai 2." Decatur, 2022.
- Antonelli, Emma, et al. "Kukai 3." Decatur, 2022.
- Antonelli, Emma, et al. "Kukai 5." Decatur, 2022.
- Lyles, Peggy. *To Hear the Rain: Selected Haiku of Peggy Lyles*. Brooks Books, 2002.
- Moulton, Madison. "Sweet Pea Flower Meaning, Popular Types, and Uses." *Petal Republic*, 8 May 2021, <https://www.petalrepublic.com/sweet-pea/#:~:text=In%20the%20language%20of%20flowers,friendship%2C%20kindness%2C%20and%20goodbyes>.
- P, Rebekah. "Dogwood Flower (Cornus Florida) Meaning and Symbolism." *Florgeous*, 28 June 2020, <https://florgeous.com/dogwood-flower-meaning/#:~:text=What%20Do%20Dogwood%20Flowers%20Symbolize,withstand%20various%20challenges%20in%20life>.
- Suzuki, Masajo. *Love Haiku: Masajo Suzuki's Lifetime of Love*. Translated by Lee Gurga and Emiko Miyashita, Brooks Books, 2000.