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Writing Creatively in a Foreign Language: Vignettes, Haikus, and Poetry

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Abstract: What is it like to teach writing creatively in a foreign language? How do I get even those students to embark on this adventure who have never even written creatively in their own language? The following article is based on my experiences teaching creative writing since 2008 at Leuphana University Lüneburg. While I mention a few pitfalls that need to be avoided, the article consists mostly of texts that always go over extremely well with students. Thus, it is a step-by-step approach for those who would like to embark on the adventure of teaching creative writing themselves. One short aside: I am a literary scholar by training, teaching mostly literature and culture of Canada and the United States, and have no formal training in the area of ESL. Therefore, readers will not get theoretical background information on how to teach creative writing from an ESL point-of-view, but rather hands-on, practical exercises that I have tried out numerous times and found to be successful. I am 100% self-taught in the area of creative writing.

Wie ist es, kreatives Schreiben in einer Fremdsprache zu unterrichten? Wie bekomme ich sogar diejenigen Studierenden dazu, sich auf dieses Abenteuer einzulassen, die selbst in ihrer Muttersprache nie Lyrik oder Geschichten geschrieben haben? Der folgende Artikel basiert auf meinen eigenen Erfahrungen als Dozentin für kreatives Schreiben an der Leuphana Universität Lüneburg. Der Artikel verweist auf einige Schwierigkeiten, die es zu vermeiden gilt und empfiehlt Texte, die bei Studierenden besonders gut ankommen. Daher ist der nachfolgende Artikel auch eine Art Einführung für diejenigen, die sich auf die Herausforderung, kreatives Schreiben in einer Fremdsprache zu unterrichten, einlassen möchten. Noch eine kurze Bemerkung: Ich bin von Hause aus Literaturwissenschaftlerin und unterrichte Nordamerikastudien (Kultur und Literatur Kanadas und der USA). Daher erwartet die Leserinnen und Leser im Folgenden keine theoretische Abhandlung, sondern tatsächlich erprobte Aufgaben im Bereich „kreatives Schreiben". Ich in 100% Autodidaktin in diesem Bereich.

Key Words: creative writing, vignette, Haiku, Modern American Poetry; kreatives Schreiben, Vignette, Haiku, moderne amerikanische Lyrik.

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1 Introduction

The creative writing class at the University of Lüneburg is part of the Komplementärstudium, a Leuphana peculiarity in the Bachelor program worth 30 CPs. It is a general-studies requirement for all students, regardless of majors, and needs to be completed between the second and fifth semester. Complimentary studies seminars are 50% language and 50% content-based and thus attract students from different areas – such as Digital Studies, Sustainability Studies, Law, or Cultural Studies. All complimentary studies seminars taught by staff from the language center are three hours long. For my creative writing classes, the generous timeframe gives students enough time to both complete the writing exercises in class and participate in peer-editing processes. The 14-week-course is geared at undergraduates with a B2-C2 level in English; however, students realize they must have an excellent command of written English in order to do well, so I mostly have students ranging C1 to C2.[1] Normally, one third of the class consists of students who have written creatively before – most of them in German – either in high school or on their own. For them, the challenge is the writing process in English; for the other two thirds, the challenge is writing creatively. I never have more than 15 students attend class to guarantee everyone enough time to read their texts in class and keep the personal appointments, which are an integral part of each class, to a manageable number.

This article focuses both on various writing materials I have used over the years and on strategies to get students to actually write creatively. One such strategy which I use before most exercises is "automatic writing," that is, write anything that comes to their mind without lifting pen or pencil. Although I do not mind students using their laptop, I encourage them to use pen or pencil for those exercises. Most students will experience pain in their hands after about 5 minutes, and normally I do not make them write longer than 7 minutes. Sometimes, they feel they have produced something of value: a phrase or a word they could actually use for one of their next creative pieces. Another exercise I have come to cherish over the years before embarking on vignettes is the following: I give them a first sentence, such as "A knock on the window woke Larissa in the middle of the night" or "It was raining heavily when Paul got into the car." I now give them about two to three minutes to continue the sentence. Then, they have to pass their page on to their right (or left, whatever you chose) via the next 3 (or however many) students to a certain student who will then have to continue the short paragraph. Of course, students are not allowed to

[1] Due to constraints of length, I will focus solely on short prose and poetry in this article. In my creative writing classes, however, students have to decide whether to write a short story or an act of a drama. For both genres, I introduce students to the creation of character and practice creating effective dialogue. The parts of the play will always be work shopped, that is, played out in class.

change either narrative perspective or atmosphere, but instead have to continue the piece in a sensible way. This we do a few times (always allowing more time for students to read the ever expanding plotline), and the hardest task for the instructor is keeping track of how to finish the exercise so in the end everyone can complete their original beginning with a fitting end.[2]

Although I do emphasize syntax and narrative perspective (mostly in vignettes) as well as tone, emphasis, and rhythm (mostly in poetry), writing – not interpreting – is always our focus. Often, students would rather write from the first-person narrative perspective; however, over the years I have learned to avoid the narrative I as much as possible (see the vignette "My Name" for an exception). It is easier to keep an authorial distance if students use other perspectives, such as the third (singular and, rarely, plural) or – very rarely – the second narrative perspective. I strongly discourage philosophical reflections or emotional dwellings since otherwise their texts, especially their vignettes, might turn into diary entries or tearful recollections of earlier traumata. By giving students rather rigorous rules, I manage to turn their thoughts away from their own feelings, giving them the opportunity to transform them into sentiments of transcending validity. Sometimes I hear comments such as, "I thought creative writing was about our own thoughts and how we feel." I then explain that this is not a class on life writing (my colleague Dr. Sabrina Völz teaches those courses regularly), but on learning strategies to convert emotionality into plot.

After each exercise, I include peer-editing activities. Many students – especially the shy ones who are convinced they are not creative and do not really belong in my class – are much more willing to have their text peer-edited first rather than receive initial criticism from the instructor. To create a more intimate atmosphere for an often difficult endeavor, I start with peer-editing groups of two and then go on – after about fifteen to twenty minutes – to groups of four or five. By the time the peer-editing session is over, most of the grammatical and contextual problems will have been solved and others will have been identified. One more point: Giving clear instructions is as vital as having a clear objective in mind. Therefore, I will always present students with an example I'd like them to follow, both for prose and lyrical pieces.

Why I teach creative writing

The class I was most afraid of during my student years at California State University, Northridge, near Los Angeles, was one called "Verse Writing." At first, I was not sure what verse writing meant and was then shocked to discover that it actually

[2] One variant of this exercise is writing the sentence on the board and having each student continue the developing story by adding a sentence.

required students to write their own poetry. I had assumed the class would focus on interpreting poetry, something I had been quite good at in high school. Needless to say, I was absolutely horrified. To this day, however, the verse writing class lingers in my mind as one of the most helpful classes for my own, mostly academic, writing. And shortly after I joined the faculty at Leuphana University Lüneburg in 2007, I have been teaching a class called, "Creative Writing: Poetry, Vignettes, and Beyond."

During the first day of classes, most of my students tell me that they have never even written creatively in German (or whatever their native language may be), and that they are hesitant to do so in a language not their first. You may ask why they took a creative writing class in the first place – well, the answer is almost always disappointing: The (late) Friday afternoon time slot often was the only one that fit their schedule. Anyway, they are registered and willing to give it a try. I tell them not to be afraid; I tell them we write everything together; I tell them we will peer-edit their texts; I tell them to trust me. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. Some are still afraid – that is, up to the point that we actually embark on our first exercise.

2 Vignettes

I normally start out with a vignette by Chicana author and activist Sandra Cisneros. Why? Because in my more than twelve years of teaching this class, students always comment on their fear of poetry, and some would even attempt to talk me into eliminating lyrical texts altogether. Vignettes[3], on the other hand, are prose pieces (although some can be quite poetic) and are short enough for students to achieve a sense of accomplishment in a relatively short time.

Cisneros, born in 1954 to Mexican immigrants in Chicago, revived the vignette – long considered an unattractive, no longer in-style genre – with her 1984 bestseller, *The House on Mango Street* (*Cisneros*).[4] In her enlightening blog, "Every Story Tells a Picture or How to Vignette," my colleague Maryann Henck describes Cisneros's texts "as imagery-infused, concisely crafted, and emotionally evocative pieces" (cf. Henck 2019). Moreover, she rightly points out that "the author herself never classified this work as a collection of vignettes or even a novel, preferring to

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3 For an equally interesting piece on vignettes, I recommend the blog "We Need a Break or We'll Break or Why to Vignette" at http://blog.asjournal.org/we-need-a-break-or-well-break-or-why-to-vignette/ by Kai-Arne Zimny (10.5.2020).

4 In Germany, the poet, publisher, and translator Hans Magnus Enzensberger tries to revive the genre of vignettes in his recent publication *Überlebenskünstler: 99 literarische Vignetten aus dem 20. Jahrhundert*.

view these ‘little stories’ as ‘a jar of buttons, like the mismatched embroidered pillows and monogrammed napkins I tugged from the bins at the Goodwill’” (*HMS* 2009: xv-xvi).

Although more than 35 years old (Cisneros 2009), this 110-pages-long book is still *the* seminal text when it comes to vignettes.[5] It is required reading in many U.S. schools and universities and has earned Cisneros honors, such as the prestigious Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, two National Endowment of the Arts fellowships, the renowned MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and the Texas Medal of Arts. In 44 vignettes of varying lengths, Cisneros tells the life of Esperanza, a Chicana growing up in a Mexican American neighborhood. In the first vignette, “The House on Mango Street” (3−5), Esperanza is about ten to twelve years old; in the last vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” (109−110), she is a young woman, ready to leave home and embark on her own life. Each vignette can easily stand on its own; read together, however, the book is a coming-of-age novel, a bildungsroman.

2.1 “My Name”

I always start out with “My Name” (10−11), the fourth vignette in *HMS*. Esperanza is a young teenager who – in the first sentences already – battles with a name she abhors: “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters” (10). These two sentences create suspense and teach students the meaning of *in medias res*: How do I start a text that gets everyone interested and eager to find out what will come next? The following sentences, “It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color” are equally puzzling. Why does the name Esperanza mean sadness and waiting? Why the number nine? And what about the muddy color? Students usually have a lot of fun trying to find answers. While some of the names’ aspects – like “sadness” and “waiting” – are explained in the course of the vignette, the color nine usually remains a secret – until someone figures out that the name Esperanza actually consists of nine letters.

The vignette’s last paragraph leaves students a bit confused: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. […] Something like Zeze the X will do” (11). While the first sentence can be explained easily, the last one poses a problem. Why would anyone wish to trade the name Esperanza for Zeze the X? Read out loud, the answer does not seem that difficult: I ask students to identify the sound, focusing on the doubling of the “z”. By pronouncing the name, they notice its hissing quality, its overall harshness. And what

5 Some, like “And some more” (35−38) or “The Three Sisters” (103−105), are three pages long, others, like “A House of my Own” (108) barely amount to seven lines.

about the X – what does the X stand for? Some students know of Malcolm X, the Muslim minister and human rights activist, and the story behind his adopted name. Born Malcolm Little, he changed his name to Malcolm X in order to call attention to and, ultimately, abandon his slave background (Little being the name of his ancestors' slave owner). The x, as students will then remember, also stands for "the unknown." Usually perceived as something negative, the x acquires a positive connotation because the unknown also means that you can turn yourself into anything you wish, that you can carve out a new identity for yourself. Latest at this point, the students' imagination runs wild, and they come up with all kinds of interesting possibilities for the x:

- x (female) chromosome
- to x something out (to erase something and start out on a clean slate)
- Latin letter for the number 10 (no longer a 9, like the name Esperanza); complete, the best (for instance in sports)
- unlike the number 9, the X stands on two "legs" (in numerology)
- read as Zeze the Axe gives the name additional weight and intensifies its power

Now students embark on their first task – to write an approximately 300-word-long vignette called "My Name." Like in Cisneros's vignette, everything mentioned has to refer in one way or the other to the vignette's title. Students will have to employ the following characteristics:

1. an in medias res beginning
2. repetitions (e.g., "It means sadness, it means waiting")
3. variation in sentence structure and length (i.e. one-word sentences, fragmentary sentences)
4. color
5. comparisons (similes): "like the number nine"

For their very first writing exercise, called "My Name," students are supposed to use the first person narrative perspective (preferably in a fictionalized manner). Now, they could actually start, but some still feel insecure and keep staring at the empty page or the blank screen before them. To get started, we will now do an automatic writing exercise. Students must write on paper, using pen or pencil. For some, the experience of holding a pen and hearing the sound it makes on paper seems to be a novel one. They are not allowed to lift the pen, pause, stare into empty space, or correct anything. Some students will ask, "But what should I write? I can't

think of anything." "Well," I often respond, "that's exactly what you should write then." I let them write for about 5-7 minutes before we briefly discuss the experience of *just* writing – without any particular thought or goal in mind. After they underline any words and/or sentences they consider important, students will finally write their first vignettes. The following vignettes were written by students during the 2019 spring term[6]:

"My Name" by Emelie Christiani

The sign on the bed was empty. They didn't know what to expect from the second born. They just expected me to arrive. And I didn't. I let them wait so they could figure out their expectations. Or at least figure out a name.

So they went back home, and my mom sat down in that old, red, crumpled armchair, and my dad dimmed the lights and put on some music. *Hot Chocolate* – Emma. And then it hit them. Why not name her Emelie? Which is funny because in the song it's actually 'Emma, Emmaline', not 'Emma, Emelie'. But *Hot Chocolate* made it sound like 'Emelie'. So that's what the sign on my bed said when I actually arrived. Red and crumpled like the armchair in which my mom misunderstood my name.

Basically, my name was a misunderstanding. And maybe that's why, by the time they'd finally figured out their expectations, they also figured out I would never fulfill them. They would always expect the wrong things. It's not their fault, nor mine, nor anyone else's. Just a misunderstanding.

"My Name" by Kalle Hübel

It hurt. Not as much as the time when Tom threw that stone at me, of course, but it hurt. It didn't even come close to the way I felt when mom came out of her room crying and sobbing like a child left alone in the dark. But when I realized Mary had forgotten my name, something inside me died.

Mary. What a beautiful name. It has a certain ring to it. Not the loud bells of an alarm clock or the sound of an ending lunch break. It reminds me of a small church somewhere far away on a mountain top. Blue skies behind it. Blue – like the simple shirts she likes to wear. Blue like her eyes. Simple blue.

Mary, that's a simple name. Svichailuk on the other hand is long and harsh. Hard to remember. I would have been okay had she just forgotten my full

[6] All subsequent examples are by students from the same creative writing class and included with their permission.

name. Svi, however is easy. That's what my friends call me. It's what everyone calls me. Hell, even Tom called me Svi when he came over to punch me or make fun of the way I cried. How come that stupid boy knew my name but the girl I kept staring at in class didn't?

Mary

"My Name" by Johanna Liebmann

I've come to terms with it. Finally. Took me long enough. Lynn. It sounds so fragile, so soft. But I'm not soft. I step heavy on the grounds below me, I take up space. My name doesn't. Those four letters can be squeezed into even the smallest of places. It's a pastel pink that leaves plenty of room for everything else. It's a small flower on the side of the road, so easily crushed by an inattentive foot. It goes unnoticed by the crowds that pass by. But people don't forget the girl with the name so soft and a will so strong. Countless times I've been asked to repeat my name to confused faces. No, that name couldn't possibly be mine. It must have been a mistake. Given to the wrong baby. And even though I thought I crushed that pastel name before I even took my first firm steps, I now wear it proudly. A walking contradiction. Shouting the softness from the rooftops over the buzzing city. Letting it give me wings.

I normally give students 20 to 30 minutes to write the vignette; I used to be more generous with time, allotting almost 45 minutes; however, for most students, time pressure seems to be necessary to get going. Of course, it is always ok to just write a few paragraphs and have the entire vignette ready by the week after. At first, everyone is hesitant about reading out loud, but eventually someone will volunteer. Unfortunately, their example will normally be so wonderful that others feel shy about reading their versions. Feedback is always supposed to be constructive and contain both positive and – where necessary – instructive comments on where and how to improve the text. Students enjoy helping their peers, readily volunteering great ideas about how to solve a particular problem.

2.2 "A House of My Own"

After "My Name," we discuss the collection's second-to-last vignette, "A House of My Own."[7] When asked at a reading in Toronto about the brevity of this vignette, Sandra Cisneros told the audience that it originally had 32 pages. Everyone in the

[7] *HMS* provides a wealth of vignettes for teaching different aspects of creative writing. The vignette, "Boys and Girls" (8–9), for instance, teaches students the use of memorable metaphors: "Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (9).

audience just gasped – 32 pages down to 7 lines! She called this technique "minimizing" – throw out everything superfluous and stay with the essentials. I find this approach fascinating because it teaches you to concentrate on just the words essential to describe what you want to express.

> "A House of My Own"
>
> Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.
>
> Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

By echoing Virginia Woolf's famous lecture and essay, "A Room of My Own," Cisneros chooses the tradition of female independence and emancipation for her character Esperanza. When read aloud, not only the rhythm of these fragmentary, yet strong and powerful, sentences becomes apparent, but also the anger expressed in the repetitive use of the words "not," "nobody," and "my" as well as through the alliterations in the words beginning with the letter "p": "With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias." As a bilabial plosive, the "p" transports a rather harsh, bullet-like sound, like the firing of a *p*istol.

Tired of living in a daddy's house and accommodating others by cleaning up after them, Esperanza longs for the solitude of her "two shoes waiting beside the bed" and the peaceful space promised by a "house quiet as snow." In this environment, she will find the solitude necessary to do what she's always wanted to do: write. Maryann Henck points out that not only the "visual or haptic image of snow is evoked: its whiteness, its soft yet cold texture," but also an "auditory image is provided: 'a house *quiet* as snow'" (cf. Henck 2019).

The vignette "My Name" already featured fragmentary sentences and even sentences consisting of one or two words only, for instance, "My great-grandmother." (10) or "Esperanza." (11). "A House of My Own" goes one step further in that it does not feature even one single regular and correct English sentence. Instead, it consists of fragmentary sentences only, adding an almost poetic rhythm to its prose. For students, both the lack of a plotline and the freedom of using expressions and grammatical structures not usually allowed in writing at the university level, are some of the greatest attractions of writing vignettes.

The 300-word vignette students now have to write on a topic of their choice should follow these rules:

1. Use the third-person perspective.
2. Create a moment rather than a plot.
3. Use alliterations and let them reveal something important about the character.
4. Use images and/or metaphors that appeal to the senses.
5. Colors are always helpful.

After finishing this task, reading it out in class, and peer editing it (sometimes with their direct neighbors and sometimes with a group of 3–4 students), they are expected to minimize their vignette down to its essentials, cutting at least two thirds. Students are so attached to their texts that they have a hard time cutting out words and sentences they tried so hard to come up with in the first place. However, the result is almost always positive.

> "The Preacher" by Emelie Christiani
>
> He's alone. He always is. Always was. Probably always will be. Alone in his black chamber under the roof. Alone with his bewildered mind. All the hatred, the harm put down in his harsh handwriting. But people don't read, they don't listen. He preaches pain and panic, a realistic image of this wicked world. But people don't see, they don't listen, they don't read. And he's alone.
>
> "Cold" by Johanna Liebmann
>
> She kept her jacket on. Sat down on the cosy yellow armchair in midst of the room warmed by joyful voices. Silently. Almost unwillingly. Wrapped in the dark fabric as if it made her invisible. An extra layer to keep the chit chat out. A piece of home. A way to keep her grounded in the whirlwind of this world. A world she does not belong to. She kept her jacket on – not to stay warm, but to remain cold.
>
> "Routine" by Monserrat Velasquez Rival
>
> There she is again, wearing the same old brown socks and that long grey T-shirt. Nobody's watching, so she can be a regular and normal girl again. She likes black tea, although she prefers the smell of the green one. She has a special ritual for every Thursday afternoon: She takes a long bath, wears her favorite outfit, and cries in the middle of a movie she's not watching. She lies down on that comfortable couch her granny gave her until the sun is gone. Now, she can get ready to meet her friends who are always wondering: How come she's always so happy?

Students are indeed eager to listen to and then critique their peers' writings in constructive ways. In order to get a discussion going, I will ask questions, such as:

“What was the feeling conveyed and do you find it convincing?” and/or “What strategies did student x choose to convey memorable moments?” After writing at least three to four vignettes, we now embark on the poetic Haiku genre. Until they learn the rules, students are convinced that – after writing vignettes – the 17-syllable Haikus are a “no brainer.” Well, during the following lessons, some are in for a surprise!

3 Haikus

The Haiku originated in Japan in the 9th century. In European languages, a three-line poem with seventeen syllables (5–7–5) has become the standard version of a traditional Haiku.[8] Haikus are untitled and have no punctuation. They are supposed to enlighten readers about the beauty of nature, putting them into a peaceful, sometimes even melancholic mood. Possibly due to the rise of esoteric literature in the second part of the 20th century, the Haiku made a strong comeback. This led to countless books and calendars with short, one, two, or three-line poems, celebrating an overly idyllic picture of nature, often accompanied by very gaudy photographs. This is one reason why I consider it important to set up rules reminiscent of how Haikus might traditionally have been created.[9]

Writing Haikus is a wonderful way of creating an awareness of syllables, sound units, and the management of both – its rhythms and pauses, its vowel and consonant structure. While in prose writings, these aspects of language are rather subtle and subordinate, in Haikus – and in poetry in general – they assume a pre-eminent role. In addition to observing the peculiarities of language, students also need to count syllables – not always an easy task.[10]

3.1 Traditional Haikus

I use a Haiku by Lenard Moore as a model for a traditional Haiku, that is, one featuring an idyllic, peaceful description of nature:

moonless winter night

[8] In the Japanese language, words that take about the same time to pronounce are often incorrectly translated as “syllables.” That is one reason why it is extremely difficult to even approximate the original, traditional concept of a Japanese Haiku.

[9] If time allows, we will do other Haiku variations as well, e.g. animal Haikus in both the traditional (idyllic scene) and the non-traditional ways (animals affected by human intervention).

[10] Especially students from non-Western cultural and linguistic backgrounds sometimes experience difficulties counting syllables. Also, due to different tonal patterns, it is difficult for some of these students to hear the differences between stressed and unstressed syllables.

a billow of rising fog

hides the distant pines (Russo)

Trying to identify the main rules of Haiku writing is often more difficult than it appears:

- no punctuation
- no end rhymes; instead the use of internal near rhymes, adding an interesting sound quality to the Haiku (night/rising/hides/pines and billow/fog)
- a phrase (a billow of rising fog hides the distant pines) and a fragment (moonless winter night); it is often easier to use a short fragment; however, as we will see in the non-traditional Haiku below, this is by no means fixed

A rule I add is to not "throw words or syllables away." With only seventeen syllables at their disposal, I ask my students to abstain from using the continuous form (verbs ending in -ing), the present and past perfect, or passive constructions. Instead, I urge them to use the present tense; in some cases, the past tense might work as well.

The task now is to write a Haiku, using the above rules for a description of a natural scene. Students seldom have problems following the first two rules, but the fragment/phrase task poses quite a challenge since many students are unable to identify a grammatically correct sentence. In order to make life easier for them, I have resorted to "outlawing" verbs in the fragment.

hidden shattered grove

the wind crawls through rotten trunks

making brown ferns fold (Kalle Hübel)

crashing ocean waves

leave white foam crowns on the sea

stormy autumn nights (Johanna Liebmann)

a single grey cloud

moves across the yellow sky

rain in the distance (Monserrat Velasquez Rival)

rising milky haze

rain glazes the deep red leaves

of the maple tree (Lale Stangenberg)

Before moving on to the non-traditional Haikus, we often do “animal Haikus,” that is, traditional Haikus which feature animals in an idyllic setting.

3.2 Non-traditional Haikus

The next Haiku we look at – again by Lenard Moore – is the so-called non-traditional or modern Haiku. Here, the once pristine natural environment is destroyed – or, in the very least, severely influenced – by human intervention:

stuttering engine

of the lobster boat at noon

gulls flutter away (Russo)

Again, we find many of the same characteristics as in the traditional Haiku. Even the fragment/phrase setup is the same; however, this time around, the phrase, “gulls flutter away” is shorter than the fragment. Again, the Haiku features internal near rhymes: stuttering/gulls/flutter. The main difference to the traditional Haiku is the disruption of a serene and peaceful atmosphere. Instead, the modern Haiku features an annoyingly loud “stuttering engine,” lobster boats returning with loads of dead fish, and anxious sea gulls hastily leaving the scene.

Students are now expected to follow the setup of the non-traditional Haiku:

in between the waves

floats a bright red plastic straw

not a single fish (Johanna Liebmann)

delicate green frogs

cross the wet gloomy highway

rushing car tires (Lale Stangenberg)

4 Poetry

Writing poetry is the big scare in creative writing classes; some students even ask me to skip it altogether. Most have horrible memories of iambic pentameters, inexplicable enjambments, or endless interpretations of a text they did not comprehend in the first place. However, it normally helps that most of them are experienced Haiku writers by this time.

4.1 "The Great Figure" (1921)

Some of the poems by the modern American poet and pediatrician, William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), are very short; to be precise, some of them encompass one sentence only. And it is exactly these poems that I focus on in my creative writing classes. We start out with "The Great Figure" (1921):

> Among the rain
>
> and lights
>
> I saw the figure 5
>
> on a red
>
> firetruck
>
> moving
>
> tense
>
> unheeded
>
> to gong clangs
>
> siren howls
>
> and wheels rumbling
>
> through the dark city. (Ellman and O'Clair, *Modern Poems*: 109–10)

The students are puzzled: Why is the figure "great"? Why is the word "five" not written out but appears as a number? How could a fire truck be "unheeded" if it drives through the streets with "gong clangs" and "siren howls"? Why is the city dark when lights are on? And what about the strange way of formatting the poem? Almost like a Chinese text, read from top to bottom.

When read out loud, students notice that the speed of the poem changes depending on the length of the line. In the one or two-word lines, the rhythm tends to be more

abrupt, almost staccato-like; in the longer lines, the tempo slows down considerably. In our discussion, we speculate: Could it be that the narrative I observes a fire truck approaching the scene, then passing him or her by with great speed before disappearing into the far distance? Other dominant characteristics of the poem include:

- color (red, gold)
- onomatopoeic sound (clangs, howls, rumbling)
- interesting rhythm; however, no meter and no rhyme scheme
- the poem possibly signifies a structure (an inverted 5?)[11]

I then ask students to write their own "William Carlos Williams sound-alike," using the above-mentioned characteristics in one sentence as well as a similar structure (top to bottom):

"Tragedy" by Lucy Beule

Sometimes I think

of this

pink transparent inflatable

plastic heart

papa bought me

at the flea market

and

that got lost

in the shrieking noise

of the children's area

at Bietigheim swimming pool.

"The Crane" by Emelie Christiani

Yellow

[11] Creating a poem with a fixed structure is a difficult task. However, I have had one student in the past who wrote the William Carlos Williams sound-alike poem like the letter E – because, as he explained, it treats the E-nd of a relationship. There is no limit to the imagination.

and mighty

it wakes me up at night

with its red

blinking

light

and a gentle squeaking sound

as it's swinging by.

"The Garden Gnome" by Kalle Hübel

I look at my

newly painted

garden gnome

as the brown soil

in front of it

turns into mud

and raindrops

come splashing down

onto its hollow head.

"The Toothbrush" by Johanna Liebmann

Every morning

when the water

splashes into

the sink I see

the green stripes

on

the

white

worn

plastic

of

my

toothbrush.

"Frog" by Monserrat Velasquez Rival

The frog

jumps over

the green pond

splashing water

all around

while catching

the buzzing fly.

"The TV" by Lale Stangenberg

The TV at my

grandma's saloon

is a dark-grey

heavy cube with

an arching

surface

that

sizzles

and

tickles

while within

the constant

chatter of voices

dissolves into distortion.

4.2 “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923)

William Carlos Williams’s most famous poem is without doubt “The Red Wheel-barrow.” Countless books have been written on this 14-word poem that set new standards for modern poetry:

“The Red Wheelbarrow”

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens (Ellman and O’Clair, *Modern Poems*: 111)

Initially, students are confused. Why does the poem start with a small letter? Why the strange structure (3 words/1 word)? What is it that “so much depends/upon”? Obviously, the scene described is incredibly banal – just a few chickens next to a red wheelbarrow. Eventually, they notice that Williams breaks the verse line regardless of correct word divisions (e.g. wheel/barrow, rain/water). All of these observations leave them a bit confused, even frustrated. However, by now they are quite experienced at locating the poem’s main features:

- one sentence
- common object
- consistent structure (3:1)
- color

I now show the fabulous video, “William Carlos Williams: Voices and Visions”[12] which outlines the main philosophical background of Williams’s poetry. In the video, it becomes apparent that Williams considered the making of a poem a quintessential, 20th century American activity – very much like the building of cars. Like a car, a poem, he insists, is also made out of small parts and then put together. It is a *thing* made. Heavily influenced by the visual arts, color, too, plays an important role in Williams’s poetry. “Poems are not made of thoughts, beautiful thoughts,” Williams says, “they’re made of words, pigments.” His famous statement, “No ideas but in things,” is his way of insisting on the particular, the concrete, refusing to move into the abstractions that distance people from the everydayness, the concreteness of life. Here it becomes important that Williams was a pediatrician, practicing medicine throughout his life and thus staying connected to the concrete, the everyday. Students are especially fascinated by the following Williams quote from the film: “The theory is that you can make a poem out of anything. You don’t have to have conventionally poetic material. Anything […] is material for art.”

Before they resort to writing their own “William Carlos Williams look-alikes,” students puzzle over the importance of the poem’s beginning. Why should so much depend on this rather common farm scenario? But is the poem’s setting really a rural farm scene? Looked at more carefully, the poem might be about the *picture* of a rural scene, but not a picture of reality. Some speculate that the scene described can be found in those plastic books that children love to look at when taking a bath (this, I believe, probably comes close to the truth). What if Williams – very much in the tradition of the 19th century poet Walt Whitman – tried to celebrate the democratic principle of poetry, normally considered an elevated ivory tower art? What if “The Red Wheelbarrow,” like Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, celebrates the everyday, the common, that which is accessible to all people, regardless of rank or class? What if Williams wanted to oppose writers – such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, or Robert Frost – by insisting on keeping poetry simple and thus accessible not only to the educated?

All of these thoughts went into the following two William Carlos William look-alikes:

> “Next to the Desk” by Lucy Beule
>
> Just
>
> imagine how all the bills

[12] Unfortunately, I do not remember when and where I came across this video. If you visit the website https://poets.org/text/voices-visions-pbs-series, you only get general information on William Carlos Williams.

notes,

sheets, letters, and sketches

would

lie around everywhere if

there

were not this old frayed

but

solid dark brown basket

to

keep them all together.

"The Green Doghouse" by Emelie Christiani

Nobody lives

inside

the green

doghouse

covered in

dirt

beneath the

willow

4.3 The Ultimate Challenge: "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1922) by Robert Frost

After the 17-syllable Haikus and the one-sentence poems by William Carlos Williams, time has come to face the ultimate challenge: Poetry following a consistent meter and a strict rhyme scheme. One of the most famous poems by Williams's contemporary, Robert Frost (1880-1963), incorporates these very requirements:

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Whose woods these are I think I know.

His house is in the village, though;

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year. (Ellman and O'Clair, *Modern Poems*: 76)

I hand out these two stanzas, pretending that this is the entire poem. We talk about the atmosphere, the narrative perspective, and the interesting fact that the Williams poems we discussed were written at approximately the same time as "Woods." Then we talk about the meter. Some students will remember the iamb (unstressed/stressed) and the trochee (stressed/unstressed) from their high school years. After briefly repeating some of the most common meters and stresses, we come to the conclusion that Frost's poem is written in an iambic tetrameter (four stresses altogether) and that it is extremely precise in both rhyme and meter. The most common rhyme scheme is ABAB, sometimes AABB. This poem, however, follows the very uncommon rhyme scheme AABA/BBCB.

After they marvel on the very precision Frost used, I ask them to write the two additional stanzas missing from the handout, staying in the atmosphere and following both rhyme scheme and meter. They look at me in disbelief – how on earth could they possibly accomplish this task? We briefly talk about the next stanza (ccdc), and I point out that it would be wise to use a word at the end of line three that is easily rhymed since it will have to reappear three times in the fourth stanza (that is: do not use words like "orange"). I tell them that they have written at least 7–10 poems by now, and that they will be able to do this one as well. Then I tell them that they have about 20 minutes to complete the task (the first ones will be finished after about 15 minutes, and everyone, without exception, will have at least one stanza finished in the time allotted. The most difficult aspects about writing the stanzas are rhythm and stress. Students tend to "bend" the rules to make the word they looked for long and hard fit both rhythm and meter. It is sometimes difficult for students to hear that words like "sunrise" or "bicycle" carry the stress on the first syllable, not the second. Here it might be helpful to emphasize the second syllable in order to demonstrate the absurdity of the sound. Some students from the

teacher training majors will clap their hands in order to get the poem's correct rhythm.

To this day and after so many years of teaching this particular poem, I am still amazed at the wonderful job they always, without exception, do.[13]

Students are always amused when they find out that Frost "cheated" in the last stanza, repeating the third line twice. Here they tried so hard to find appropriate rhymes, and the master himself obviously ran out of creativity at the end of his lyrics!

He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep. (Ellman and O'Clair, *Modern Poems*: 77)

5 How it all ends

After the semester reaches its midpoint, I use the last two hours of normal class time for personal appointments. For the remaining sessions, each week two to three students will send in whatever they have written thus far about two days before their appointments (normally three vignettes, four to six Haikus, and a few poems).[14] I look at their writings, find alternatives where I think a sentence, an image, a metaphor is awkward, and then discuss their pieces with them. These appointments are extremely important because they give me a chance to talk to students on a one-to-one level – especially to those few who have been shy about reading their pieces out aloud. More often than not, I have questions: What did they mean by such-and-

[13] Maria Moss "Improving Robert Frost's Poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening": http://blog.asjournal.org/improving-robert-frosts-poem-stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening/ (10.5.2020).

[14] Students without appointments are supposed to use this extra time for writing the longer pieces (short story or part of a drama).

such phrase or this very metaphor? Are they sure about this statement? I do not really understand what this simile refers to.

Students will have to hand in the following exercise for their final grade: 3 vignettes based on the criteria outlined above; 4 poems: a William Carlos Williams sound-alike (based on "The Great Figure"), a WCW look-alike (based on "The Red Wheel-barrow"), and the continuation of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and a poem of their choice. This could either be a poem, rhymed or un-rhymed, dealing with whatever topic. There are always some students who ask if they could hand in song texts. Of course they may. In my opinion, a song is a poem with music.

Eventually, I need to grade my students' texts – admittedly a very difficult task. However, since for all exercises – vignettes as well as poetry – I ask students to follow specific rules, coming up with the correct grade is not as difficult as it might seem. In her article, "Life Writing – Writing Life: A Project-Based Approach," my colleague Sabrina Völz (in print) has pointed out that "[c]reativity is the most sub-jective category and thus the most difficult to mark," and that "grades in creative writing seminars tend to be better than in other classes." I wholeheartedly agree, and although I tend to be a tough grader, I think the more relaxed grading in creative writing classes is appropriate since I know that creative writing students generally invest a lot more work than their peers in other seminars.

If time allows and everyone has finished the assigned tasks, I sometimes show fea-ture films on with creative writing. The two I found most interesting are *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006; dir. Marc Forster) and *Paterson* (2016; dir. Jim Jarmusch). *Stranger Than Fiction*, starring Will Ferrell, Emma Thompson, Dustin Hoffman, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and Queen Latifa, is a comedy-drama about a writer, Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson), who suffers from writer's block. When she finally re-sumes her story, the accountant Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) inexplicably finds him-self in it. Unfortunately, however, Karen Eiffel has a tradition of killing off her protagonists.[15]

The film *Paterson* stars Adam Driver as the bus driver and poet named Paterson. The film is a wonderful homage to the most famous son of Paterson, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams. The film shows how Paterson (the man) writes about common occurrences in Paterson (the town) and demonstrates that sometimes you need the help of a friend – even a four-legged one – to reach new poetic heights.[16]

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[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26FBhM_pjoc (10.5.2020).

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8pGJBgiiDU (20.5.2020).

Concerning the evaluation process, I most of the time use the university's evaluation forms which are electronically checked and uploaded. In all those years, the creative writing course has always been in the 4-5 range, with 5 being the best. Students' comments vary: Some write "too many Haikus, too little time for the short story"; others would have liked more time with vignettes and could have done without the Robert Frost poem. Almost all enjoy the atmosphere of being able to help each other and the opportunity to be creative in an otherwise overly academic setting. Many of the in-class readings turn into lively, entertaining performances, and I am always thrilled about the students' constructive feedback which refers to mostly three points: Firstly, that a class, such as creative writing, is offered because it adds another layer to their rather strict academic studies; secondly, that creativity is not something you have or don't but can actually be practiced; and thirdly, the atmosphere of trying to turn everyone's text into the best text possible. Last but not least, students will comment on their newly acquired command of English when it comes to the subtleties of the language: its rhythm, flow, and sound. For me, it is the class I enjoy most, and every semester anew I marvel at my students' ability to express themselves creatively and hope that they will continue to do so.

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