

## Female Images in Richard Wright's Haiku: This Other World

by  
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In traditional haiku, nature is not a representation of goodness, truth, or beauty but often uncovers truths. These truths are often revealed in a relationship between the human subject and nature. Traditional haiku often include a clear reference to the season in which they were written, often showing how nature transforms sensations to the human psyche—where nature's tangible presence stimulates a cathartic experience.

Wright's haiku reveal that there can be a conflict between nature and culture. Nature on its own is neither good nor bad; the interiority of the seer defines what is seen. When there is a conflict between the natural subject and the culture it sometimes suggests that certain members of this culture are being exploited by their culture and are made unnatural by the culture and its demands of the subject, such as women exploited for labor and sex.

Like writers of traditional haiku, Wright uses nature in his poems; however, his use of nature often does not show the wonders or mysteries of the natural world and how these wonders/mysteries correlate to the wonders of the internal (the human heart, psyche, etc.). It is Wright's use of human nature—its ability to exploit, abuse, and injure—that exposes suffering. His natural world discloses women and young girls suffering exposure to natural elements like rain and snow rather than learning from them, pondering them or enjoying them. Something they are unable to do because of cultural economic deprivation and/or exploitation. Thus, nature itself is not necessarily a wellspring of either transcendent sensationalism or of horrific pain in and of itself; rather, it is the subject's social/cultural position in the world that causes suffering and which enables him or her to see what he or she sees in nature. If one is treated unjustly, exploited, and/or hurt, nature can be an agent of pain and suffering.

Wright reveals in his use of nature that the social position of the speaker and his object in the haiku are relevant to the haiku's meaning—to meaning-making in general. This seems to be very much in line with Wright's views of nature and culture in *Native Son*. What one sees is made possible because the culture provides the means, or lack thereof, for one to see it (or not). Instead of nature revealing epiphany-like, transcendent moments, in Wright's haiku nature reveals the truths of his subjects—women and young girls who suffer and who are separated from the natural world because they are physically and economically exploited by their culture.

The female imagery in Wright's haiku reveal his concern for the exploitation and suffering of women. Wright's female subjects' perceptions of the natural world rely on their experiences in their unnatural "natural" worlds. Unlike the Japanese noblemen, priests, writers, singers, and artists who had the time to find beauty and pleasure in natural phenomena, Wright's female subjects have to contend with the negative aspects of nature.

Nature often has a dual role in Wright's haiku, occupying not only the position of mother nature but playing the role of human nature as well. It is overwhelmingly human nature that impedes Wright's female subjects' abilities to enjoy mother nature. As a result, many of the female subjects in Wright's haiku experience the type of cultural determinism Wright emphasizes as controlling the fate of the male protagonists in his prose. The following haiku (number 415 in the book) is an example of Wright's harking back to the theme of cultural determinism present in his fictional works:

In a drizzling rain,  
In a flower shop's doorway,  
A girl sells herself

*(104)*

The theme of human nature causing women to suffer natural elements because of cultural demands is clearly presented in this haiku. Rain sets the tone—something death-like, melancholy, gray, unhappy. The speaker does not reverse the reader's expectations. The girl (youth—connection to growth, spring, promise of flower shop flowers) sells herself shy—prostitutes herself as the flower (nature) is prostituted/appropriated/exploited in order to fulfill man's (culture's) desires.

Note that it is a drizzling rain and not a torrential downpour. This suggests that the girl's prostitution and suffering are not particularly cataclysmic to the culture that demands them. The drizzling rain suggests a slow, steady, experience of suffering rather than a quick or sudden death or injury. That she stands in the flower shop's doorway is significant also because the doorway is a bridge, a transition between two worlds—the outside world as human nature and the inside world as mother nature.

However, culture exploits nature both inside and outside the flower shop. Inside the flower shop, the natural world of flowers is exploited/sold because of culture's demands. Outside the flower shop, the girl representing the natural is also exploited/sold because of culture's demands. The girl and the flowers are exploited by culture's desires to own and to use whatever it desires. Instead of being in nature and permitted their own natural experiences of life, the flowers are cut and sold in order to fulfill human (cultural) desires. Likewise, instead of being

in nature as a young girl who can experience sex for its pleasures, the girl is a commodity that is cut off from her youth and its pleasures as she is bought and sold in an economy of exploitation that denies its member's humanity.

Exploitation of women's bodies echoes again in haiku number 378:

Upon crunching snow,  
Childless mothers are  
searching  
For cash customers.

(95)

Here a woman's nature—her sexuality—is exploited for culture's (the cash customer's) desires. Being a mother is not, for these women, a part of this sexual economy of exploitation. Because prostitution relies on the use, abuse, and exploitation of women's sexuality but not its natural result (children), the natural world and result of women's sexuality (her own and her offspring's) are annihilated by economic and cultural demands on her flesh, flesh the culture sees as a commodity for its own use.

Unfortunately, Wright is aware of far too many women who are represented by the plights of the women in the haiku above. He can only watch as they lose the innocence Wright expresses in haiku number 363:

A little girl stares,  
Dewy eyes round with wonder,  
At morning glories.

(91)

During their youth, young girls wait patiently for some unknown good to touch their lives. As this promise of hope turns into a dream deferred, the girls become victims of cultural demands who are made to suffer while they are waiting. The word "stares" suggests something unnatural about this young girl's gaze. It eliminates the romance one might expect from such an idyllic scene which is an indication that the myriad opportunities available in life, represented by the morning glories, also will be eliminated in this young girl's life.

Haiku number 186 represents Wright's memory of a woman towards the end of her life of suffering:

From these warm spring days,  
I can still see her sad face  
In its last autumn.

The focus here is on the juxtapositions of seasons. The speaker is calling to mind an old memory during warm spring days. Because spring represents growth, renewal, and rebirth and autumn represents decay, death, and the onset of old age, this haiku suggests that the speaker may not be in tune with nature because he recalls her sad face during these warm spring days. It also suggests that the female subject is out of tune with nature since the speaker remembers her sad face in its last autumn, “last autumn” suggesting that she has experienced deaths before as a metaphor for loss.

The conflict in many of Wright’s haiku containing female imagery is between the natural human subject and her experiences in a corrupt culture. Wright’s haiku seem to emphasize that it is a cultural determinant that is to blame for his subjects’ being out of tune with nature: sun, rain, spring, autumn, flowers, and snow. Wright’s female subjects suffer because cultural elements—men’s (sexual) desires, cultural demands, forced labor, loss, pain, suffering, and injustice—will not allow them freedom to fully be or to be at one with nature.

After writing four thousand haiku, Wright seems to be more vehement than ever in his belief that two of human beings’ devices, materialism and greed, are the twin culprits of racial discord and poverty. While his fiction and nonfiction works explicitly advocate his position, he is only able to express this indirectly in his haiku. The primal outlook on life for which Wright gives witness coincides with his belief that there is a preeminence of intuition over knowledge in the search for truth. This is what leads Wright to call into question the basic assumptions of existence, that is, questioning the life one is socially and politically taught to live. In his haiku, as in all of his works, Wright admonishes us, that for us to see ourselves truly as human beings, we must give our utmost attention to comprehending the relationship between humanity and nature.



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