

The South in Richard Wright's Haiku

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Richard Wright, a Mississippi-born, world-famous African-American novelist for *Native Son*, composed some four thousand haiku in the last and half years of his life in Paris. In his haiku, Wright uses his pen as a brush to paint his tender feelings of nature and human nature.

Technically, a haiku presents the occurrence of an event at present time. It emphasizes the spiritual fusion of human beings with nature. Because it is terse in pattern, concrete in expression, and present in time, haiku has a strong tendency to be “intuitive rather than intellectual or allusive” (Shirane 21). Wright's haiku display valuable cultural treasure and heritage. It is significant to examine the poetic values in his haiku that show a different picture of Wright as a writer or his true self as a human being.

Oliver W. Harrington, one of Wright's close friends and also an expatriate in Paris, remembers that

When Dick wasn't tramping in the woods or sitting with the voluble Norman peasants in a café “down the road,” he was engrossed in his newest obsession. One uses the term obsession because Dick admitted that since he'd discovered it he was completely incapable of stopping. . . . Wright found in them a remarkable control of words and symbols and plunged into one of his characteristically meticulous and exhaustive studies. At the time of his death Dick . . . had subtly changed the quality of the ancient Hai-Kai and had injected a Negro flavor which . . . enriched them tremendously. (14-15)

In Wright's haiku, south is a favorite theme with such "Negro flavor." A good example is haiku 565 (all are from *Haiku: This Other World*):

A slow autumn rain:
The sad eyes of my mother
Fill a lonely night.

Wright uses the technique of internal comparison in this haiku to juxtapose rain and mother's sad eyes. This juxtaposition intensifies his remembrance and lonely feeling in an autumn night. Writing this haiku, Wright must have recalled the old days of poverty and his mother's suffering. When they lived in a tenement in Memphis, he told his mother one afternoon that he was hungry, she paused her ironing and looked at him with tears in her eyes. In *Black Boy*, Wright talks emotionally that

my mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life. . . . A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me self-conscious, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me. (100)

One prominent part of Wright's haiku is the use of the image of the sun or the moon to present the south. Haiku 38 is a good example:

That abandoned house,

With its yard of fallen leaves,
 In the setting sun.

This haiku presents a desolate picture of the south. Instead of telling us directly, Wright conveys the meaning through the combination of images that make a reader feel intuitively. Further, the montage of the close-up of the abandoned house and fallen leaves followed by the long shot of the setting sun creates a perspective that Wright is not unfamiliar with when he was a black boy living in the villages and small towns in Mississippi and Arkansas. Although the sun functions as an intensifier of desolation in this haiku, in other haiku of his, it functions as a soothing power that brings warmth to a person's poor life, as in haiku 60:

Sun is glinting on
 A washerwoman's black arms
 In cold creek water.

Haiku 345 is another haiku which shows Wright's "Negro flavor":

The sad sound of hymns
 Flooding on to autumn fields
 In hazy moonlight.

This is certainly a blues haiku that reminds a reader of the sad, old days on the plantations in the Deep South. To Wright, memory of the south means sadness and homesickness, as described in the following two haiku:

A bloody knife blade
 Is being licked by a cat
 At hog-killing time. (30)

Don't they make you sad,
 Those wild geese winging southward,
 O lonely scarecrow? (581)

Haiku 30 and 581, which express Wright's memory of the south, may be the echoes of nostalgia in *12 Million Black Voices* in which he says, "In autumn the land is afire with color. . . . hogs are slaughtered and cured in lingering smoke; corn is husked and ground into meal. At twilight the sky is full of wild geese winging ever southward . . ." (32). In a word, the south in Wright's haiku is a place full of dreams, memories, hardships, and loneliness.

Works Cited

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