

Do This in Remembrance: The Relationships among the Works of Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore

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“History, family, and place are very important to the poet, especially if he or she is an African American. Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks are among those who have recorded the truths and half-truths of the people they knew and/or encountered in going about their daily lives. This reporting of mundane history is often central to a poet’s version” (Moore 314).

Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore are poets who fully follow the poet’s version Moore speaks about. They are griots that present the honesty and influence for both unsung, misunderstood mundane events and environments through three-dimensional descriptive imagery. “For a black poet to write haiku in such a society may be a gesture of liberation” (Ward 133). Haiku poetry is a literary genre that present images of nature and personality in ways that go beyond realities of readers who read, comprehend, and interpret it. Haiku poems are intended to make readers take deeper looks into the meanings and essences of the events, material things, natural elements and things, and people they are describing and/or uplifting.

But, haiku poetry is a literary art form that is neither American nor African American in origin. “I don’t see haiku as a black form, but then, you utilize whatever modes or vehicles are available to you” (Knight 978). Lenard Moore works in a mode ultimately alien to African and European imperatives, determined to project his vision. “Moore has taken the risk of being on the cutting edge” (Ward 133). Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore are Twentieth Century poets who authored works in the haiku canon and greatly excelled in these arenas. Although these authors are African American

males of rural Southern heritage, veterans of the military, winners of prestigious awards and fellowships, and lecturers/teachers, they are opposites in personal lifestyle choices, how they were exposed to haiku poetry, and the events and environments they choose to author about within haiku poetry. Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore have the relationship of recollecting the places which shaped them in and among their respective writings. Using the form of haiku, Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore, in several textual windows, display the importance, relationship, and relevance among prison, the military, death, love and the natural occurrences associated with the change of seasons in the rural, Southern United States to readers.

#### Extra-textual Window

Why did Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore decide to write poems in haiku structure? Some see haiku mainly as a kind of poetry, a literary phenomenon. “For others, it is a source of philosophical inspiration and in some way helpful to their chosen life style, possibly influenced by Zen” (British Haiku Society 1). Etheridge Knight was given the inspiration to write haiku through his mentorship with fellow Black Arts poet Gwendolyn Brooks and when she brought Knight books of Japanese haiku while he was incarcerated in Indiana State Prison. Knight recollects why Brooks inspired him to write haiku. “It was because you were too wordy in your poems” (Knight 17). Etheridge Knight decided to write haiku poems to cope with his memories of terror as a soldier during the Korean War, to cope with being an alcohol, heroin and morphine addict, to cope with lengthy, isolating periods of incarceration, and to cope with losing love and feeling like an outsider in the Black Arts Movement.

Lenard D. Moore used haiku to cope with feelings of loneliness while he was

separated from his soon-to-be wife while serving in the United States Army. In an interview with Dick Gordon, Moore remembers the marching cadences sung by his military unit during basic training served as inspirations for him to express and write his feelings. While in basic training, Moore would write letters his letters to her in poetic form, and then he would try to include a poem with each letter.

Haiku poetry is Japanese-based poetry of three lines that uses words of only seventeen syllables. “Haiku demands an idealized cultural base, one less material and cluttered than our own” (Ward 134). Knight and Moore use haiku to give freedom to myriad thoughts and feelings in response to the situations that were happening in their lives. “Followers of haiku also debate whether the Japanese haiku experience (defined in socio-cultural, literary and environmental terms) is too exotic to be assimilated by the West” (British Haiku Society 1). In an interview with Sanford Pinsker, Etheridge Knight explains

To me, what prompts art, what prompts the creative impulse comes out of a particular group at a particular time in history and the being of the artist and that artist’s primary audience. An aesthetic grows out of a people, along with the people’s economics, their politics, and everything else. So, to try to dilute the authenticity of a group’s aesthetics as divorced from that group’s politics, that group’s place in the general scheme of things, is foolish (Pinsker 11).

The African American haiku experience does mirror the Japanese haiku experience because artists such as Knight and Moore showcase how African Americans accepted, lived, reacted to, and utilized the often circumstantial and vastly disliked socio-cultural and environmental terms within their various environments. “His use of Japanese forms has helped to open what African American poetry consists of by drawing correspondences between two seemingly disparate cultures” (Raimey 1120). Lenard D. Moore is in agreement with Knight as to the validity of a poet of any cultural background

being involved in the expression of events and environments within a certain cultural aesthetic. “Moore explains that any ethnic group would have some things that are culturally specific to their community which might be reflected in the structure and function of the literary and cultural organizations” (Raimey 1119).

The British Haiku Society has argued that Western poets have not been discouraged from writing haiku poetry due to whether it has fully acquiesced to the Japanese haiku rules. “They have used such knowledge as they had their own artistic intuitions...one may talk of Western traditions and Western styles which have a certain validity independent of Japanese haiku” (1). The society believes that Western haiku have certain attributes that readers should use to recognize and evaluate validity of a haiku poem or poems composed by a Western author. Knight and Moore’s haiku poetry possess the qualities presented by the society. “The qualities of Western haiku include spirit, “presence”, accepted writing conventions, choice of appropriate subject matter, poetic taste, sense of proportion, and structure” (1).

Spirit relates to the artist’s conscious and unconscious decision to give him or herself as an effort to author writings which discuss subjects through an acute and precise objective point of view. “These observations occur in the course of actual, ordinary life and are recorded with an effort to efface the self” (British Haiku Society 1). Modern Japanese haiku critics have said that a “haiku spirit” is not in existence, but the spirit comes from the individual poet’s intuition. The individual poet has invested time in learning and creating works in the haiku tradition and uses his or her innate sense in reacting to events.

In addition to spirit, “presence” is an integral part of the Western poet who writes

haiku. Haiku is usually written in the present tense. Presence relates to single events or occurrences and not to continual events or generalizations. “Some feel the present tense lends a sense of immediacy and the poet “actually being there”, even if he/she isn’t actually mentioned in the poem” (British Haiku Society 1). On the other hand, poets can actually write haiku poetry from secondary sources such as media. The British Haiku Society notes Lenard D. Moore’s usage of television as a source for this haiku:

midday heat  
 soldiers on both sides  
 roll up their sleeves (British Haiku Society 1)

As a casual observer to the television screen, Moore could not possibly feel the extreme, scorching heat the soldiers were experiencing, but he could relate their reaction of rolling up their sleeves to the heat. “His haiku . . . , which meld African American imagery and experience with the classical Japanese forms, characteristically stress verbal compression, appreciation for nature, and the importance of familiar detail and vivid imagery” (Raimey 1120). In this, Moore uses his own experience of being a soldier without showing how he possibly reacted to unbearable conditions. The aim is to offer readers, drawing on their own schemata of experience, the chance to “feel themselves into” the recorded observation, and (without any explicit statement of feelings by the poet) to share an emotional experience resembling that of the poet (British Haiku Society 1).

In essence, the remaining attributes of choice of appropriate subject matter, poetic taste, sense of proportion, and structure in haiku poetry authored by writers within the Western Hemisphere work with one another as a gestalt unit. These conventions work as a gestalt unit because these attributes are solely the decisions of the writer. “Some of the

matters that influence the way a haiku poet writes, or sets a haiku down on paper, are merely taste” (British Haiku Society 1). Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore closely follow the prescribed appropriate subject matter that is usually selected for Japanese-styled or Japanese-influenced haiku poetry. Knight and Moore feature lightness, darkness, and the change of seasons in their haiku poems. “Traditionally, Japanese haiku have been intimately bound up with almost ritual celebration of the endless cycle of the natural seasons, specifically as they occur in Japan” (British Haiku Society 1). The accepted writing convention of Japanese haiku may seem impossible to grasp at first, and the author who is trying to work within it may struggle with writing a meaningful piece. The British Haiku Society quotes The Matsuyama Declaration with a possible solution that would help an author struggling with haiku. “Haiku is grasped with all five senses, not by logic.” (British Haiku Society 1) Etheridge Knight and Lenard Moore use the accepted convention of Japanese haiku to instill discipline or training to their writings and writing styles. Etheridge Knight believed that following the standard form of Japanese haiku was strengthening his talent in the way agility training and weightlifting strengthens the abilities and performance embodied by professional athletes.

I try to use it, I try to follow the general form. I try to bring my own American consciousness to it. I like them because you gotta deal with the noun and the verb. You ain’t got too much time to fool around with some abstractions, you know, a lot of verbs, and adjectives and stuff (Tracy and Knight 18).

To me writing haiku is a good exercise. I dig and respect them because they create an image-paint a picture so precisely. The draw pictures in very clean lines. You say what you want to say symbolically. I work with haiku a lot in my attempt to handle the language-the word (Rowell and Knight 978).

Lenard D. Moore uses haiku poetry to inspire readers to take time to reminisce. Moore comments to Dick Gordon that he writes poems that hopefully appeal to the sense

of “re-perception” in order to give a place its distinctness (1). Moore adds that he was involving himself in learning the abilities of compression, writing concise poetry, and incorporating imagery in his work. “When he is successful, his work shows a remarkable discipline and surgical perception, qualities too often lacking in contemporary American poetry. He presents touchstones of what might be” (Ward 134).

### Psychological Window

The haiku poetry that Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore compose can be analyzed and evaluated within a psychological textual window. The psychological textual window is used to explain the mental spaces authors are living in and through when their works are initially written. Etheridge Knight’s psyche was an amalgamation of life-altering events in his life. His mindset was definitely shaped by suffering a shrapnel wound as a young soldier in the Korean War, using alcohol and drugs to alleviate the physical pains stemming from the wound, serving lengthy periods of prison incarceration in prison, finding and losing love with fellow Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez, and finding frustration with the views of the Black Arts Movement.

I died in Korea from shrapnel wound, and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life (Knight 1).

The haiku poetry Etheridge Knight authors in prison do not journey into the graphic and gruesome details that people often associate with the prison environment. Knight channels his view of the people and places within prison seem or appear to him through symbolism and figurative language. In Poems from Prison, Knight writes most of his haiku poetry to express the conditions of himself and other inmates in the environment. Two poems in “Haiku” in Poems from Prison read

Eastern guard tower

glints in sunset; convicts rest  
like lizards on rocks. (Knight 18)

Morning sun slants cell.  
Drunks stagger like cripple flies  
on Jailhouse floor. (Knight 18)

Within these two examples of haiku, Knight describes the background of the prison cells with references to lightness, darkness, and the guard tower to ironically convey it as a place of vast depth and height instead of cramped space. Additionally, Knight uses simile to compare the other inmates and him with flies and lizards to show how small they may feel under the constrictions of the governing authorities in the prison power structure.

Lenard D. Moore discovered haiku as a young writer serving in the U.S. Army in Germany. Moore was possibly frustrated stationed in an unfamiliar country remote in distance from the United States. In turn, his frustration sparked feelings of longing for the familiarity of the stories from his grandfather, not being close to his soon-to-be wife, Lynn, and the remarkable places of his North Carolina upbringing. Moore's grandfather, Luther, inspired him to further his love for language through detailed storytelling. Moore comments in an interview featured on [The Story](#) with Dick Gordon that his grandfather would often tell stories at various places including an oak tree, a wooden porch, and an old shed. Moore weaves a possible physical recollection of his grandfather through the following haiku poem.

Sipping the new tea  
his wrinkled face absorbs steam . . .  
the smell of roses (Moore 529)

In later years, Moore uses haiku poetry to chronicle the psychological reactions to pivotal events such as the death of his daughter, Maiisha. Moore remembers that the



haiku was written in response to an event that occurred at the funeral. When he placed his hands on top of the coffin, they slid down the side and created a loud squeak.

Hot afternoon  
the squeak of my hands  
on my daughter's coffin

Moore details that this particular haiku poem was not logged immediately on paper nor was it revised, but it kept speaking to him (Gordon and Moore). In a response to an interview question posed by Dick Gordon, Moore comments that writing definitely brings about healing (1).

Summer evening sun;  
a row of tombs-their shadows  
reaching the ditchbank (Moore 529)

Winter stillness—  
old barn's splintered remnants caught  
in a crescent moon (Moore 530)

“Moore's gifts as a poet draw heavily on his rural upbringing, focusing on nature as a dominant theme” (Raimey 1120). Like Knight, Moore uses lightness and darkness to establish the meaning of the environments within the various settings of his haiku poetry. Matthew C. Brennan states that unlike the haiku of Etheridge Knight . . . whose haiku build from concrete imagistic settings to metaphorical closure, Moore's haiku often resemble prose-like statements(147).

#### Subtextual/Metatextual Window

The haiku poetry of Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore have many subtextual and metatextual references, and a subtextual/metatextual reference these authors share is a balance between lightness and darkness. Knight and Moore speak to each other about the environments that had amazing impacts on their writing styles. The balance in these

textual windows involves the lightness and darkness related to prison, love, and associations of settings in the rural, Southern United States. A common natural occurrence Etheridge Knight features in a few of his haiku poems is snowfall.

The falling snow flakes  
 Can not blunt the hard arches nor  
 Match the steel stillness. (Knight 19)

Snow from the mountains  
 Of my heart instantly melts  
 In your warm Blackness. (Knight 24)

The softness of the snow that is falling does not complement the hardness of the steel that comprises a majority of the buildings on the prison grounds. Hardness or machismo is expected in the actions and personalities of the prisoners and the prison guards. The second haiku poem is dedicated to the fellow Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez, who Knight was briefly married to in the late 1960s. He writes this haiku using as an expression of the love he feels toward her. Snow is used as a metaphor for his cold and hardened persona, and Sanchez's expressive zeal and spirit for consciousness and Afrocentrism has brightened his heart and mind.

Another subtextual reference related to the lightness and darkness of the rural, Southern United States used by Knight and Moore is moonlight.

A bare pecan tree  
 slips a pencil shadow down  
 a moonlit snow slope. (Knight 18)

Under moon shadows  
 A tall boy flashes knife and  
 Slices star bright ice. (Knight 19)

Peace  
 Hound dog sits his tail  
 On the bank of long dark stream  
 And howls at the moon.

Rabbit sits in hole  
 On the hill and strokes his fur  
 In myopic fear.

Ringtail coon rests on  
 Log in stream, and grins, and waits  
 Till moon behind dog. (Knight 27)

a black woman  
 breastfeeding her infant-  
 the autumn moon (Moore 530)

Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore emphasize an air of quietness that sometimes accompanies a moonlight setting. In “Peace,” Knight describes the image of hunting in the points of view of the hunter and the hunted. Knight speaks to Moore about longing for the familiarity of where he was raised, the rural Southern United States. In this haiku, Lenard D. Moore is conveying the connection between mother and child by the light of a fall moon.

### Conclusion

Whether the discovery of haiku poetry is through the mentorship of a Pulitzer Prize winning author or the individual’s reaction to the longing for a familiar home base and loved ones, authoring works in haiku structure has proven to be very successful for both Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore. Knight and Moore demonstrate their excellent capacities of weaving spirit, “presence,” poetic conventions, taste, subject matter, structure, and proportion into magical concoctions to make the Western-born, African American poet worthy enough to detail life-changing experiences through a Japanese-styled format. In haiku poetry, the kindred literary spirits convey the relationships among death, life, love, the military, prison, and the rural, Southern United

States. The importance and reality of these events and environments shape them into griots who tell amazing but concise stories to others who have or might have not faced or been in these same events and environments. Etheridge Knight and Lenard D. Moore have achieved an elevated level of Zen by being willing to express secret passions and thoughts to others who are willing to listen.