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The Recognition of Micro Poetry as a Literary Art Form Across Time and Culture

Thesis by Kaitlyn Dahle, Mentored by Dr. Jesse Graves

Micro Poetry is a small yet powerful art form. It can convey a lot of thought, imagery and emotion in only a few lines and it is a literary art form that has transcended time and culture. We will be looking at evidence of micro poetry and micro writing in different cultures during different periods of time as well as the inspiration for my own micro poetry, the structure of my micro poems, my inspiration behind my writings and finally my own examples of micro poetry.

Though micro poetry may be a different and unusual literary art form, it is not a new concept. In fact, it is an art form that has been around since the ancient Greeks –with Sappho being the most famous example. Though a lot of Sappho’s writings are fragments of potentially longer poems, most lyrical poetry of that time was fairly short anyways, so she is still keeping in the micro writing tradition of her time. We can see the beauty of her micro writing in a few examples of her work, like this fragment, “To have beauty is to have only that,/ but to have goodness/ is too be beautiful/ too.” (Grodén, 29). Though a mere four lines long, this poem still gives readers the powerful message that being good is better than being beautiful. And in three lines, Sappho writes something even more powerful, “They will remember us/ later on/ I say” (Grodén, 94). This fragment was written a few thousand years ago, and her prediction was right and was conveyed to readers in only a few words. Some examples of her works are as small as a piece of a sentence, like this for example, “...with a voice like honey” (Grodén, 130). Though a mere five words make up this fragment, it is none the less beautiful and a reader can see with this fragment exactly what Sappho was trying to convey.

Proverbs are another form of micro writing that has been prevalent across the centuries and across cultures. There is even an entire book in the Christian bible dedicated to the proverbs

of King Solomon, proving that micro writing is relevant and important to us even now. Here is an example micro writing in the book of Proverbs that is relevant to readers now, “Hatred stirs up conflicts, but love covers all offenses.” (Proverbs 10:12, 778). Proverbs occur not only in the bible, but through many different cultures throughout history. Like this proverb for example, “A shut mouth incurs no debt.” (Brown, 94). This proverb teaches us that if we stay silent, we will stay out of trouble -not to mention it gives the readers a bit of a laugh. Then there is this proverb that is a bit shorter and a bit more serious, “Virtue survives the grave.” (Brown, 96). Though shorter than the first example, it is still very moving example. Proverbs are usually only as long as a sentence, but still remain important to us to this day. Though they are short, they are easy to remember and still have the power to convey important messages and we can still learn lessons from them.

Moving forward in history from biblical times to the 17th century, a Japanese writer by the name of Basho had formed one of the most recognizable forms of micro poetry found in Asia: the Haiku (Burlinson, 1998). These poems are three lines long with a total of 17 syllables. Though in looking at his writing, it may not fit the traditional formula exactly because in translating the poems from Japanese to English, some of the poems lost this traditional form. None the less, Basho’s writing and the Japanese Haiku is an excellent example of micro poetry from Asia and from the 17th century.

More recent and more famous writers across cultures have expressed themselves to readers in the form of micro poetry. In the 19th century, one of the more famous poets from the United States who uses the power of micro poetry is Emily Dickinson. Like in her poem *Success is Counted Sweetest*:

“Success is counted sweetest/ By those who ne'er succeed./ To comprehend a nectar/
Requires sorest need./ Not one of all the purple Host/ Who took the Flag today/ Can tell
the definition/ So clear of Victory/ As he defeated-dying/ On whose forbidden ear/ The
distant strains of triumph/ Burst agonized and clear!” (Dickinson, 59).

There are only twelve lines in this poem, but in those twelve lines she packs a lot of emotion; describing the agony and frustrations of defeat and the longing of success through the eyes of a defeated person. And even though it was written over one hundred years ago, readers can still relate to Dickinson's micro poem.

Around the same time in Spain, romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer also makes literary magic with his micro poem *Sighs Are Air, and Go to the Air...*:

“Sighs are air, and go to the air,/ Tears are water, and go to the sea./ Tell me, fair one, if
you know:/ When love is forgotten, where can it go?” (Bécquer, 205).

Though this poem may be short, it still leaves the readers thinking. This poem also reinforces that this truly is an art form found all over the world.

In the early 20th century, particularly the decade between 1910 and 1920 (Pratt, 11), there was a movement of poetry that was basically modern poetry in miniature (Pratt, 13). This movement was the Imagist Poetry movement and it was comprised of now famous modern poets like E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams. With the inspiration of micro poetry movements of earlier time periods –like the Greek fragments that I had mentioned earlier – Imagist writers applied similar styles to these poems. Writer T. E. Hulme literally had a poem titled, *Fragments*. The following is the first part of Hulme's *Fragments*:

“With a courtly bow the bent tree sighed/ May I present you to my friend the sun.” (Pratt, 42).

Ezra Pound is also a great example of an Imagist poet carrying on the tradition of micro poetry with his two poems, *In the Station of the Metro*:

“The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough.” (Pratt, 50)

and *Alba*,

“As cool as the pale wet leaves/ of lily –of –the –valley/ She lay beside me in the dawn.” (Pratt, 51).

Another movement in the early 20th century, paralleling the Imagist Poetry movement, was the Harlem Renaissance movement in the United States. The poet Claude McKay of the Harlem Renaissance wrote some micro poetry, like his poem *The Tropics in New York*, for example:

“Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,/ cocoa in pods and alligator pears,/ and tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,/ fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,/ set in the window, bringing memories/ of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,/ and dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies/ in benediction over nun-like hills./ My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;/ A wave of longing through my body swept,/ and, hungry for the old, familiar ways,/ I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.”

Though each individual line in this poem is much longer than the poems we were looking at earlier, he still manages to write all of this in 12 lines –the same length as Emily Dickinson’s

earlier poem. McKay and all of the other 20th century poets helped continue on the tradition of micro poetry and helped inspire micro poetry all the way into the 21st century, bringing us to today.

Though when I had started writing micro poems, I was unaware that anyone else besides myself was doing what I was doing. I started writing micro poetry when I was 18 years old. I was a senior in high school and I was trying my hand at songwriting –I would write these little fragments that I wanted to later piece together into a larger song. Songwriting actually was the inspiration behind the actual structure that I had put into these poems. In CD cases, there would be album art booklets with lyrics of the songs in the booklets. Often, the song would start with a period and two dashes (or “./”) and would have each line break in the song separated by a dash (or “/”). One musician that did this was the pop artist Pink in her album *Missundaztood*. I was inspired by the way the lyrics were formatted in these booklets and I then applied this format to my song fragments. The fact that these writings were originally pieces of soon to be songs was also why I did not end each poem with two dashes and a period because they were originally fragments meant to be added onto. This attempt at songwriting very quickly escaped my interest and in fact only the first few micro poems I had written were originally meant for songs. I started writing these little poems keeping the same formatting and style but had no intention of combining them together to make longer poems or songs. They were each their own poem, though very short and often sharing similar themes.

When I started writing these poems, I had no idea what to call them. They weren't songs, but I had never seen anybody write poetry like I did, so I didn't feel comfortable calling them “poems” until two years later. The most similar thing that I had found at the time was a type of song writing called “zine writing” in which people would take short phrases from songs and

often incorporate them into art. A music group called Angelspit would not only write songs, but make these so called “zines” as well. I was not incorporating these poems into art or songs, but in an attempt to put a name to what I was doing, I called my poetry “zines.” That is, until I shared them for the first time in a sophomore level poetry class in college. My professor at first called them “vignettes” and then said that my writing could very well be a form of micro poetry. Feeling more confident in my writing and that other readers had considered my work to be poetry, I continued writing these micro poems over the next five years, and I would eventually write over 600 micro poems.

The poems that I have compiled from the original 600 will be separated into eleven groups. All of the poems that fall under these groups share the same theme as noted in the group title, which are as followed: Social Commentary, Lies, Violence, Families, Feminism, Pain, Money, Love, Motivation, Nature and Ars Poetica. Each group title is bolded, underlined, enlarged in font size and tabbed over from the rest of the writing preceding and following the title and each poem will be at the most thirteen lines long.

When I first started sharing these poems, I would not use anything but spaces to separate them and it would bring confusion to readers. So, each poem in this collection is separated by two asterisks and a tilde, or *~*, as well as two spaces before and after each poem. This is to ensure that the reader knows that each poem is a separate poem and not one long poem put together in a strange way. I am not sure where I had gotten the inspiration to separate each poem with such a device as, “*~*,” but it is visually interesting and does the job of poem separation for the readers.

The font that I used for the poems is unusual as well. It is called *Courier New* in Microsoft Word and since the font is larger than usual fonts like *Times New Roman*, I chose the font size to be 10 when compiling these poems on a Microsoft Word document. The inspiration I had in choosing this font and font size came from when I would text myself micro poems from my phone. The text would be sent to my email in the form of an attachment that would open in the Notepad application on most Windows computers. The poem from the text message would then be displayed in this font and font size and I thought it was interesting, yet still an easy font to read.

I wouldn't add a lot of proper punctuation to my poetry because with the style of poem writing I had with the incorporation of the dashes and periods, adding punctuation made the poems look crowded. This doesn't mean that I had gotten rid of punctuation all together in my poems, but with the placement of the dashes throughout each poem, the reader still senses the emphasis that punctuation would provide in traditional poetry.

Keeping this in mind, I would also not properly capitalize words that one would normally capitalize in poems, like the first word of the poem or sentence as well as names like "God." I would, however, capitalize words like "I," "I'm" and "I've" because these words lowercased would not be as appealing to neither me nor other readers. Language and grammar change over time but the messages in writing tend to remain the same, which is the most important part of poetry. In William Carlos Williams' poem "The Lion, Part I," there is an instance where we as readers can see the growth of punctuation in the English language with this line, "Use defames! the attack disturbs our sleep" (180). Notice how Williams does not capitalize "the" after the use of the exclamation point. Additionally, this line stands alone in this poem

belonging to no other stanza, so Williams also makes the choice to not end this line with a period. This helps show that there is flexibility and growth that occurs in writing in terms of the use of punctuation and capitalization.

Returning to the eleven groups –Social Commentary, Lies, Violence, Families, Feminism, Pain, Money, Love, Motivation, Nature and Ars Poetica –I had decided to organize my poetry by these themes because it made it easier to read my micro poetry. I had originally planned on going in a linear pattern from the oldest poems to the most recent. However, this proved to be impossible because I would text and email myself poems as well as scribble poems down on scraps of paper, never dating anything so I can never be exactly sure what chronological order these poems go in.

Also, I must add that in the short five years that I had been writing these poems, I had experiences in loss, poverty, love, frustration, confusion, anger and other emotions and events that shaped the poems I've written. Though it is important to point out that even though a lot of these poems do reflect thoughts, experiences and emotions I've had, I also wrote about imaginary scenarios that I have not gone through or experienced, so it is not to be assumed that every single poem is reflective of my life and life experiences.

The following section shows examples of my own micro poetry, which will be notably different from the micro poems and micro writing shown earlier. This proves that micro poetry is a relevant literary art form with the potential for growth and can truly be enjoyed by readers across time and culture. My examples and the ones previously shown may also inspire future writers to recognize and continue to grow this literary art tradition.

Social Commentary

./free yourself/ from the box/ of assumption/

~

./is it impolite to stare?/ or impolite to desperately look away?/

~

./why do we feel safe/ in a group/ of strangers?/ we are safest/ when there
are no people around/ at all/

~

./why/ does it take the insight/ of foreigners/ to make you appreciate/ your
own home nation?/

~

./little pudge/over belt/starve myself/ or I'll go to hell/

~

./he lives in an ivory tower?/ holy cow, that's a lot of teeth!/
/

~

./make up transforms you/ into a painting to be admired/ but never touched/

~

./justice may be blind/ but she can still touch/ hear/ taste/ smell/ fear/
die/

~

./I talk/ to a plastic box/ I call my friends/

~

./aluminum foil/ makes me nervous/ we place our food/ atop sheets of metal/
like the Roman did/ atop plates of lead/¹

~

./he likes his jargon poetic/ but not above his head/

~

./youth and strength/ does last forever/ just not in the same person/

~

./admitted and accepted/ contradictions/ make you real/ especially to
yourself/

~

~

./the devil is the being/ who doesn't make you lie to others/ the devil
makes you lie/ to yourself/

~

./story book/ open wide/ time to tell/a million lies/

~

./we all/ stretch a content face/ over every single emotion/

~

./why?/ why can't you tell me your name?/ I love you so much/ but you won't
tell me/ who you really are/ please let me in/ your wall of lies/ hurt us
both/

~

./In the midst of conversation/ fiction springs from my lungs/ where did
that come from?/ that didn't happen/ why did I tell you that?/

Violence

./the smell was the worst of all/ for it was not only of death/ but of total
liquidation/ and disrespect/

~

./the only thing/ better than meth/ is death/

~

./I may be killed/ for what I say/ but at least your bullets/ proved me
right/

~

./helter skelter/ use my words as your scapegoat/²

~

./genocide/ has no nationality/ give one a gun/ and they'll show you/ their
hate/

~

./it's impossible to think/ that one can never be loved/ even psychopaths
have a fan base/

~

./tell me what to hate/and I will hate it with a passion/

~

./the best way/ I can describe fame?/ I put on a mask/ then cut open my
sternum/

~

./I'm better than you/ I'm smarter than you/ more influential/ more beautiful/ and of value, too/ I'm more courageous than you/ got more allegiance than you/ I'm just so pretty and funny/ sexually satisfied, too/ I'm just better/ way better/ I'm better/ so much better/

~

./the only immortal thing in this world/ is death/

~

./most people/ are generally good/ but like to be entertained/ by awful things/

Families

./maggots/ are the children of flies/ no wonder kids are so cruel/

~

./mothers may make children/ but fathers make mothers/

~

./the myths of childhood/ why must we lie to our kids?/ why are we in denial?/ don't we remember our childhood?/ don't we remember the pain?/ being

forced to grow up all too fast?/ why do we lie to ourselves?/ why do we
believe that bad things don't happen to children?/ because we believe in
every inch of our being/ that they won't live the lives we did/

~

./remember children/ eat your veggies/ for they'll make you a healthier
snack/ for the boogeyman/

~

./why does childhood/ feel like an Eden/ forever gone?/

~

./the definition of home?/ a safe place/ to go to sleep at night/

~

./the secret warrior/ the constant worrier/ the bottomlessness of your
love./ as an adult now,/ I wonder/ how did you love me so much?/ the power of
love/ for your child/ how did you love me so much?

~

./she was old/ older than any she has ever known/ her brother/ mother/
father/ husband/ friends/ all gone/ she would speak of them with ease/ but
her son/ tears/ stop/

~

//the best thing/ about leaving your family/ is finding someone/ to create a family of your own with/

~

//everyone's childhood/ is rough/ which means as parents/ we will never/ be good enough/

Feminism

//I walked to the bathroom/ and noticed something strange/ since when/ has the triangle marked masculine/ and the circle feminine?/ oh wait/ I see it now/ you're gross/

~

//would one who majors in women's studies/ be called a gynecologist?/

~

//people seem frightened/ by the word "feminist"/ but I can tell you/ that every woman/ has dreamt of becoming/ the first female something/

~

//people always ask when I'm upset/ "is it your period?"/ but what if it's not?/ what if I'm genuinely upset/ about a certain person/ or situation?/

~

//I am a 20 year old woman/ who can read/ write/ I don't have children/ I have an education/ I am going to college/ I can vote/ drive/ earn as much money/ as I am willing to work for/ terrible that all that/ makes me a minority/ in this world/

~

./ she took a bullet/ for every girl/ who was denied the basic right/ of
school/

~

./ angry in ignorance/ he demanded an international men's day/ though if he
were really for gender equality/ he would've known it already exists/

~

./ the myth that makes me angry/ is that of only two genders/

~

./ all this fighting/ waiting/ hoping/ bitterly expecting/ is exhausting/
why can't I live the life I want?/ I didn't choose to have a vagina/ it's
exhausting/ to keep apologizing for that/

Pain

./and she said/ she didn't believe in religion/ for all it ever brought her/
was death/ and persecution/ I/ shocked and confused/ could never understand/
few have hurt like she has/

~

./loneliness finds friendship/ in the reaches of the mind/ with frustration/
sadness/ depression/ and bitterness/

~

./I have/ alcoholic/ in my blood/

~

./don't leave me/ alone with me/ for too long/

~

./the sadness/ it surged from my chest/ scraping my throat/ and spilled from
my eyes/

~

./when the audience is warm/ I feel the blaze/ of an Arizona day/ but when
the audience is cold/ silent/ I feel daggers in my face/

~

./twisting railings and branches/ confused patterns/ never making up the
mind/ cold distance from the hard decisions/ compounding twisting
exponentially/

~

./you love/ where you came from/ but never/ want to go back/

~

./five years of soreness/ and I cannot sleep/ waiting for a better life/ to
treat my aching bones/

~

./why/ would a good god/ let the holocaust happen?/ to test the threshold of
human forgiveness?/ what if hitler prayed for forgiveness?/

~

./headlights/ silent/ still car/ fallen branch/ frightened/ disturbed bird/
cracking thunder/ rational mind/ runs inside/ fear/

~

./and then/ there are those young/ bitter men/ with tongues so sharp/ they
slice tears from my eyes/

~

./cry/ to fall asleep/ drink/ to stay asleep/

~

./loneliness is painful/ of course/ but the girl always needed a friend/ and
shut down when there was no friendship/ no one for her to follow around/

~

./my back aches/ after carrying twenty years/

~

./my eyelids/swell/ with emotional fatigue/

Money

./people can do amazing things/ when they are paid to do so/

~

./"so, I'll give you 10 pennies/ if you can give me a dime"/"just take the dime!"/ "thank you/ I can eat today"/

~

./there are no first world nations/ just first world people/

~

./dreams/ are expensive/ make sure/ you can pay the price/

~

./he says/ money will make him happier/ and maybe it will/ but the bitterness/ is in the marrow now/ money won't rid you of anger/ when anger/ is free/

~

./but money doesn't care/ if you're sobbing/ on your knees/

~

./thank god/ I can afford/ to be honest/

~

./I don't want/ to be rich/ I want to be/ middle class/

~

./technology/ will always change/ but only for those/ who can afford it/

~

./I find it funny/ when people say/ that money doesn't buy you happiness/
they've obviously/ never/ gone/ hungry/

~

./cars/ the only piece of jewelry/ you can fit your whole body into/

~

./that new car has so much in it/ you can live in it/ unfortunately the one
I live in/ isn't nearly as exceptional/

~

./if you want to make money as a teacher/ marry a doctor/

~

./the internet/ is not a problem/ in places with no electricity/

~

./the biggest motivation in the world/ is hunger/

~

./musical lies/ gold fast rich power/ dancing to the throbbing pulse of the
song/ in a time of despair/ fear/ recession/ I can't wait for the days/ of
guitar serenades/ with melancholy notes of sadness/ appealing to the boredom/
of an economic boom/

~

./wouldn't a golden parachute/ make you fall faster?/

~

./I like when my purse/ hurts my shoulder/ it means I have enough money/ to
not spend all of my change/

~

./I'm the 99%/ with my \$500 iPhone/ and \$40,000 a year education/

~

./escaping my impoverished conditions/ with the luxuries of 3G/

~

./in the depths/ of poverty and despair/ is the untreated dirt/ in which
greatness grows/

Love

./she waited for love/ to come to her/ waiting in her castle/ hoping for
love/ but when love would come to her tower/ and would ask her to let down
her hair/ she'd walk away from the window/ and sit in contemplation/

~

./we would go to the cemetery/ and make love/ like we were trying/ to be
ironic/

~

./they were friends/ so close/ I wondered if their wives were jealous/

~

./my heart/ is not big enough/ to hold all the love/ I have for you/ so it
spills/ from my eyes/

~

./beautiful/ lovely/ sexy/ wonderful / gorgeous/ smart/ handsome/ loving
/caring/ amazing /restraint/

~

./it's funny/ how you never notice your heart beat/ until you feel it/
between your legs/

~

./I'll tell you/ useless facts/ just to talk to you/ fill the empty air
between us with words/ trying to remain attached to you/ in conversation/

~

./so thirsty/ the warmth of his drink/ caressed my throat/

~

./beautiful make up/ sweet perfume/ lean in for a kiss/ you taste like
chemicals/

~

./she whispered something/ of somewhat passion/ and we'd like to think/ we
fell in love again that night/ in our routine of love making/ pretending we
actually cared for each other/

~

./the warmth of your breath/ melts my isolation/

~

./your height/ makes me feel dirty/ your kiss/ crumbles like cubes of sugar
in my mouth/ my blood/ rushes to my face/ clamors to escape my pores/ trying
to be with you/

Motivation

./talent/ a word people use/ as an excuse/ to not try/

~

./opportunity shines/ like a bright light/ and we shy away/

~

./sleep never comes/ for those who dream/

~

./if you want to get out of the cage/ be willing to get cut/ by the wires/

~

./if dreams were easy/ they wouldn't be called dreams/

~

./god/ I know it's baby steps/ but it's like a race/ where you can see the
finish line/ from two miles away!/ you can only look down at your feet/ for
so long.../

~

./failure/ can be so tempting/

~

./happiness lies in slumber/ for you never wake it from its sleep/

~

./defeat/ will always be easier than the fight/ but you will always be angry
at yourself/ for walking away/

~

./when people say/ "name five"/ I say/ "you can be the first"/

Nature

./if you look/ at the brain/ and the spinal cord alone/ you will see a fish/

~

./the clouds climb down/ to blanket the Earth/ and all I want to do/ is
crawl back into bed/ and sleep peacefully/ with the clouds around me/

~

./where the clouds/sweep the ground/with their long fingers/on a warm/
spring day/ that's where you will find me/ wrapped in rain/

~

./I don't wish to be/ the nectar of a flower/ but to be tucked between the
soft petals/ while the perfume grabs my dreams/ and leads me to slumber/

~

./why/ did you turn on the light?/ if it were on fire/ you would see the
flames/

~

./your eyes/ travel across the miles/ as you politely stare/ into your
daydream/

~

./the ting of a harp/ the slow melt of the sound waves/ like chocolate/

~

./then/ I am bitten by an insect/ and am reminded of the inconvenience/ of
reality/

~

./empty chairs/ on the porch/ we've forgotten to sit on/ mornings in the
freezing cold/ we've forgotten the afternoon sun/ shacked up/ preparing for
winter/ while the autumn afternoons/ are still quite warm/

~

./wood woven chairs/ outside air/ plethora of leafy colors/ free/

~

./the dead leaves/ disintegrate/ beneath my feet/ becoming dust/ enriching
the soil/ for new life/

~

./the winter/ makes me as mean/ and as depressed/ as an overcast,/ bitter
cold day/

~

./the painful numbness of frozen/ the ice strewn about the air/ like
needles/ cold and dry/ sucking the tears from my eyes/

~

./cold/ dry cold/ chapped skin/ blood cold/ liquid flowers/ sting the
chapped sores/

~

./snowflakes/ like kisses/ warm my tongue/

Ars Poetica

./I write because/ the words/ will eat me/

~

./fits of passion/ are hardly creative/ but feel so good/ when written down/

~

./art/ is when you can turn your pain/ into something/ you can control/

~

./symbolism/ symbolism/ get to the damn point symbolism/

~

./art and writing/ is the science of imagery/ creativity/ and culture/

~

./fluid from the mind/ drips down the throat/ in streams over the shoulder/
flowing down the arm/ pooling in the hand/ as it slowly trickles out/ of the
pen/

~

./when I asked you for a book of poems/ all those years ago/ this isn't what
I had in mind/ just thought I'd let you know/

Notes

1. Ancient Romans would coat bronze and copper cooking pots with lead or lead alloys to help seal these pots from seepage. Lead also produced a sweet taste which encouraged a larger use of lead cookware in everyday Roman life (Waldron, 393).
2. The Beatles song, "Helter Skelter," was an inspiration to the infamous Charles Manson in which he and his followers believed there were hidden messages in the song that led them to their killing sprees (Emmons, 5).

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