

**The Combined Use of Poetry and Prose
in Janice Mirikitani's "Spoils of War"**

by
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The experiences of being a Japanese-American woman serve as an important inspiration for author and poet Janice Mirikitani in her story "Spoils of War." Through the weaving together of poetry and prose, she details the struggles for self-understanding that often come with being both a descendant of an Asian culture and a female. "I write about these things," Mirikitani says of her style, "because I think it is healthy to express these thoughts or these feelings of violence and rage in words . . ." (Carabí 70). She conveys her strain against stereotypes of race and gender, as well as her difficulty grappling with her past, through the autobiographical figure Hatsuko. The majority of the story consists of prose, with the incorporation of poetry occurring only at the climax of her character's development. In "Spoils of War," prose is used to tell the story of Hatsuko and the family that shaped her, whereas the use of poetry reveals Hatsuko's thoughts, doubts, fears, and ultimately her strengths as a woman of Japanese descent attempting to break free of the labels of sex and origin.

Although Mirikitani uses prose to tell the greater part of Hatsuko's narrative, her treatment of this genre easily allows for the incorporation of poetry. The transition between these literary styles is not at all surprising or abrupt to the reader, but rather makes sense given the experiences of the character. By switching between Hatsuko's past recollections and her present search for self-actualization, Mirikitani's prose creates a broken and almost schizophrenic effect in her tale. She often uses short, fragmented sentences and switches frequently between stories. The addition of poetry, then, comes as a calm relief and a sign of Hatsuko's development as a person. For example, when Mirikitani describes the feelings of Hatsuko, she uses brief and rapid sentences before switching to an extended section of poetry. Mirikitani writes, "Refusal to take responsibility. Making herself victim was the punishment. Self-fulfilling destruction. She walked for a long time not even knowing the direction. *Visions of famine / like trees / burned from a fist of flame / I wander from village / to village . . .*" (Mirikitani, "Spoils of War" 195). As seen in this case, the prose is used to describe Hatsuko's feelings and leads up to her actual thoughts, which are written in poetry. Prose, then, tells the story of the unhappiness of Hatsuko, and poetry is used to reveal the character's passionate thoughts of better defining herself as a person. The transitions between prose and poetry are perfectly natural, and the reliance of these two genres upon one another emphasizes the conflicting feelings that Hatsuko experiences throughout "Spoils of War."

The styles of poetry and prose used are a major factor in this story's effectiveness. When using prose, Mirikitani switches between first and third person and from past to present tense. She questions the reader in one instance, asking, "Don't you think it wrong to be so pompous? Cold? Critical? Keeping me isolated? Weakened by guilt, her feeble attempts to define herself were unheard . . ." (Mirikitani, "Spoils of War" 190). This form of writing gives the sensation of Hatsuko's mental turmoil as she observes the present and remembers the past. Mirikitani constantly changes her style of prose in order to create a tension or confusion. This helps the reader relate to what exactly goes on in the story and is used especially when Mirikitani details the journey of Yuki and the rest of her family to the Japanese internment camps. Author Miryam

Leitner-Rudolph notes that “Mirikitani’s internment [literature] can be seen as a homage to those members of her family whose lives have been disrupted by the camp experience. As the author acknowledges, the ‘writing out’ of people so close to her was a very painful, almost searing process” (Leitner-Rudolph 29). Her personal experiences lead Mirikitani to choose a writing technique which effectively expresses Hatsuko’s mental drift between memory and present moment. Because her prose was so difficult to write, it is thus difficult to read. When portraying Gerald, Hatsuko’s lover and a character representative of all the wrongs in her life, Mirikitani uses incomplete sentences. Hatsuko’s inability to stand up to Gerald leads to a frustration which is evident when she describes “Words choking her in the face of something so wrong. Empty space between the pace of letters in her head. Win. Profit. Human life inconsequential. They would surrender. All is fair in war . . .” (Mirikitani, “Spoils of War” 191). These statements seem to be desperate, which match Hatsuko’s feelings about this man. He is an oppressive force that she both desires and struggles against, and Mirikitani emphasizes this through the structure of her prose.

Hatsuko’s self-discovery comes in the form of poetry. Mirikitani includes four four-lined poems which contain imagery of nature such as storms and the ocean, as well as the incorporation of Japanese. Signifying a connection by Hatsuko to her heritage, they serve as a reminder of what should be truly sacred to her. These poems occur strategically at the climax of the story, when all of her feelings culminate. Comparing her emotions to a tempest, Mirikitani illustrates Hatsuko’s thoughts, saying:

<i>Arashi</i>	<i>Storm wind</i>
<i>Fuku</i>	<i>Blows</i>
<i>ocean waves outreached</i>	
<i>clutching for the moon</i> (Mirikitani, “Spoils of War” 196)	

These four short poems are representative of her feelings of desperation rather than actually being the thoughts of Hatsuko. As she flees from Gerald and all of her troubles, Mirikitani employs extended stanzas which peer into her thoughts as she realizes that she must make the effort to change her life herself, instead of playing a passive and subservient role to others. The author uses this style and theme throughout much of her poetry, as seen in the verses of her poem “Prisons of Silence,” where she writes, “He awakens from the tomb / I have made for myself / and unearths my rage / I must speak” (Mirikitani, “Prisons of Silence” 8). Part of this development of breaking free from a stereotype’s restrictions comes with remembering where she came from. Her mother, family, and culture are all important factors in doing this, and they are included in Hatsuko’s thoughts. She recollects, “Crimson walls and live / flowers jumping from / her mother’s throat / barbed wire crowning her hair / Little by little / she remembers the shadow of herself” (Mirikitani, “Spoils of War” 199). Mirikitani’s extended poems occur at the end of Hatsuko’s story, and show her development from a submissive and accepting Japanese-American female into a strong-willed and understanding woman. Through poetry Hatsuko rediscovers herself and the things that are precious to her, breaking away from the idea that her only redeeming feature is her body and evolving into a true and self-reliant person.

In “Spoils of War,” Janice Mirikitani blends the genres of poetry and prose together to detail Hatsuko’s, as well as her own, struggle to define themselves as persons. The combination of these two forms of literature, as well as the style in which she present these forms, is used to emphasize the conflict that Hatsuko faces as she grapples with the idea of living as an independent woman instead of a stereotype of the Japanese-American female. The broken forms of prose are used by Mirikitani to depict the desperation and suffering which she and her family

were forced to endure because of heritage and gender. Poetry is an emotional release for Hatsuko, allowing her to discover and define exactly what she desires out of life. Hatsuko is an extension of Mirikitani's own experiences and feelings, as well as a representation of those of many women and Japanese living in the United States. Mirikitani went through a similar development as Hatsuko, and says of her past, "I had for many years attempted to be white, middle-class, and acceptable. I realized that I was *not* acceptable and that I was not white. It took tremendous crises to get me to that point" (Carabí 67-68). Knowing that Mirikitani experienced exactly what she writes about makes Hatsuko's struggle very real. Through her varied use of poetry and prose, Janice Mirikitani inspires the readers of "Spoils of War" with the strength that one woman can gain for herself through examining and following the desires of her heart.

Works Cited

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