

Submission 7

WEEPING WILLOW

An Ode to Chika Sagawa

Under the glare of summer's eye A
willow woman pinches a pin.
A week of shed skins hang on her silken thread, Spider
legs stretching across the weathered surfaces
As grasses bake in the stagnant air.
Yellow flour settles into knees and elbows,
And I hear the willow weep for another cycle.
Beneath the hum of morning Dragonflies
tickle like eyelashes
And die with the blink of a stoplight.

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Down the Rabbit Hole: Redefining Sense and Nonsense in Modernist Poetry

Art, like any communicative medium, requires a framework of common understanding for an audience to interpret meaning. As a literary art form, poetry depends on established laws of syntax and semantics to craft an intelligible message. However, such norms only hold value

insofar as author and audience agree on their significance. Modernist writers complicate this implicit contract by exploring new ways to convey meaning. Gertrude Stein abandons logical progressions of thought in order to destabilize the role of rationality, while Chika Sagawa wields surrealist images to prioritize experience over comprehension. Stéphane Mallarmé incorporates both words and blank space into his writing, expanding poetic expression into the visual realm. While these works may appear nonsensical, such experimental methods reject definitive interpretations and create space for readers to participate in the poetry. Through a metaawareness of their own ambiguity, modernist poems force the reader to reevaluate their perception of sense and nonsense in the experience of art.

The overt antirationalism displayed in modernist works represents an implicit acknowledgement of artistic deviance. By removing reason from their work, these poets aim to connect with their audience on a subconscious level. Robert Martin Adams notes that “Many modernist works destroy trust in a specious surface by filling it with deliberate anomalies and absurdities,” which reflects “an equivocal attitude, at best, toward the reader and his impulse to ‘understand’” (26). From this perspective, modernist poetry is not so much a random collection of nonsense as an intentional manipulation of reader expectation. Gertrude Stein demonstrates the tenuous relationship between sense and nonsense by following the laws of syntax while disregarding those of semantics. “Susie Asado,” for example, asserts that “A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees” (Stein). The simple diction and grammatical construction of Stein’s poetic lines create the illusion of a coherent surface. The “pot” acts as the subject-noun, which corresponds to the verb “to be.” This transitive verb takes the direct object “a beginning of a ... bit of trees,” which is modified by the adjective “rare.” On the level of syntax, Stein’s line is

grammatically valid, thus setting up an illusion of intelligibility. However, this collection of words does not connect to form any sort of concrete message. Stein's suggestive yet inconclusive phrases push readers to grapple with their "impulse to understand." The lack of denotative significance invites audiences to seek out alternate forms of meaning, and this subversion of the rational mind collapses the distinction between sense and nonsense. Like many of her contemporaries, Stein works "with and against the reader's logical inertia" (Adams 26) to redefine the rules of poetic communication. The ambiguity inherent in such an experimental method allows more space for readers to negotiate meaning. This self-aware antirationalism opens new possibilities for the experience of poetry and art.

Given that modernist art rejects rationality as an interpretive strategy, a new set of norms must form the basis of common understanding. A spirit of "art for art's sake" emerges in the poetry of the period, shifting the focus away from rational cognition and toward visceral experience. Adams observes that "Whatever could be seen in an esthetic way was potentially a work of art" (27), a sentiment echoed in André Breton's argument that "the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful" (4). By foregrounding both beauty and novelty in their work, the modernist poets dismiss overt messaging in favour of a more nuanced, subjective experience. The poetry of Chika Sagawa embodies these values by presenting implausible yet evocative images. In "Illusory Home," the reader observes as "A chef clutches the blue sky. Four fingerprints are left Even here the sun is crushed" (Sagawa 113). The impossibility of such events lends a nonsensical dimension to the poem, but there is nevertheless a whimsical beauty to Sagawa's imagery. The strong verbs and vivid colours create a distinct mood, inviting the reader to experience rather than understand.

The surrealist nature of these images allows for an individualized interpretation within the framework of Sagawa's vision. Even in a mode of apparent irrationality, the writing conveys something of substance to the reader. In the words of Tristan Tzara, such poetry is "strong straight precise and forever beyond understanding. Logic is a complication. Logic is always wrong" (4). By casting aside the restrictions of reality, modernists embrace the space that exists beyond conscious comprehension. In accepting this space as a valid expression of human experience, modernist poetry dismantles the dichotomy of sense and nonsense.

The artistic form resulting from the modernists' antirationalist experimentation is one of inherent ambiguity. Instead of a direct author-to-audience communication, modernist poetry invites the reader to participate in the creation of meaning. When presented with a seemingly unintelligible piece of writing, "the reader must construct whatever consecutive and coherent shape he can" (Adams 26). This exercise is foregrounded in Stéphane Mallarmé's "A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance." Through words scattered across the page, Mallarmé constructs a stanza that begins with "this rigid whiteness / derisory / in opposition to the sky" (Mallarmé 15). This image indicates Mallarmé's poetic meta-awareness by suggesting the whiteness of the nearly empty page. His erratic formatting makes blankness as essential to the work as the words themselves, but the significance of these spaces is left for the reader to interpret. Furthermore, the stanza continues with the lines "too much / not to stand out / narrowly / whoever" (Mallarmé 15). Whereas the preceding lines uphold an illusion of coherence, this section descends into near unintelligibility by deviating from the rules of syntax. Mallarmé sows confusion about the subject of the phrase, and this disorientation forces the reader to exist in a sustained space of ambiguity. As the poem continues to fragment traditional constructions, the

reader must piece together the poem's intended message. Yet, the absence of definitive guidance creates doubt about whether there is a message at all. This creates what Alex Ross calls "the endless exegetical game, which has a different outcome for each reader"(5). The ambiguity inherent in modernist writing displaces the author and invites readers to create the meaning of the poetry. Instead of preventing analysis, nonsense becomes a tool to open up multiple possibilities for interpretation and experience.

In spite of its nonsensical façade, modernist poetry is an experiment in human communication. By rejecting rational messaging, the art of the period explores the multidimensional ways that art can convey experience and emotion. Although the intended meaning is less direct than traditional writing, the fact that modernist poetry conveys such evocative images indicates that the words are not truly nonsense. If, as Adams suggests, the era of modernism will never end (32), innovations in art and communication will continue to define future generations' conceptions of interpersonal understanding. The spirit of modernism thrives on novelty and experimentation, meaning definitions of sense and nonsense must continue to adapt accordingly.

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