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ANALYZING A POEM THE SWIMMER BY SAKUTARO HAGIWARA**Îrina-Ana DROBOT¹**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the poem *The Swimmer* by Sakutaro Hagiwara, based on the theory of phenomenology, as well as on reader-response criticism, and on the context provided by the poet's belonging to the Modernist movement. The poem *The Swimmer* can be regarded as an illustration of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body, which offers readers the opportunity to consider the body not as an object but, instead as a subject which allows us the opportunity to perceive the world, as well as to interact with it. The sensory experience is suggested clearly all throughout the poem. This experience allows the poetic persona to experience subjectively the reality of swimming and to express this personal perception. The reader-response approach also focuses on subjective experience, and this paper shows that, in expressing an emotional reaction to the text, as well as an interpretation of it relying on background knowledge, readers rely on free associations based on the elements present in the poem. For Merleau-Ponty the external space is experienced subjectively, as an internal space, a subjectivity which underlies reader-response approaches, as well as Modernist literary works. Poetry is also focused on a subjective experience and view of the world. We cannot remain objective as readers even, when reading the poem *The Swimmer* by Hagiwara. We see the swimmer completely merging with his surroundings, showing that he is in his environment and that he is enjoying himself.

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Keywords: Reader-response criticism, Phenomenology, Modernism**1. INTRODUCTION**

Sakutaro Hagiwara (1886-1942) is a Japanese Modernist poet (Hayashi, 1998), who, based on his connection with the Westerner culture (Wilson, 1966) can be considered accessible to us readers of today. Modernism is not just a movement, but a frame of mind including experimentalism, which makes us relate easily to this author.

The poem *The Swimmer* can be relatable at any time to present-day readers, since it is not restricted to the context when it was written. It presents a universal experience, where fantasy and reality mix, as the swimmer can be watched through the water which offers access to a different experience than the one belonging to everyday life reality.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Reader-response criticism (Mart, 2019) can show us how readers perceive the experience described in this poem, based on their emotional reaction and on their interpretation, which relies on their background knowledge. Phenomenology brings to our attention the way we see experience in our own way (Iser, 2022). Subjectivity is also underlined by Modernism (DeZurko, 1969), showing that objectivity does not exist and cannot offer us access to understanding reality.

2. METHOD

Water is depicted as another world, suggesting that swimming is part of another realm of experience. Readers are introduced to the subjective experience of the swimmer that the poetic persona presents for us readers.

As any text can be understood as a process of communication between author and readers, we can start by understanding the readers' reaction, in the way in which they relate emotionally to the experience of the swimmer, and in the way in which they start interpreting the poem, based on reader-response criticism (Mart, 2019).

The perception of the swimmer and the sensations of the swimming experience are presented based on a fantasy world's images. What gets the readers' attention and what gains centre stage is the experience of sensations. We start with the image of the dilation of the swimmer's torso, which happens diagonally: "The swimmer's torso dilates out diagonally" (Hagiwara, 2024).

Right from the start readers are introduced into a world completely different from the one they are familiar with. At the same time, they can understand, based on common knowledge and personal life experience that the dilation diagonally happens because they are watching the swimmer in the water. Through the water surface, reality looks distorted, so the diagonal dilation of the swimmer's body could be easily explainable and related to the everyday life reality. The second line confirms this: "Two outstretched arms line up alongside one another" (Hagiwara, 2024).

This second line is as grounded in reality as it can be. It describes the swimmer in action in the water, moving his arms. Afterwards, however, the images of the poem slide towards a fantasy world, completely removed from common, everyday life. Readers can consider that the poetic persona, as he watches the swimmer, beginning to imagine, prompted by the image in the first line, that the swimmer is part of another world, with other laws of physics. The swimmer introduces us into another medium, which is best described by fantasy images and by poetry.

The third line could still be interpreted as being composed of figurative language and nothing more: "The swimmer's heart is sheer see-through like a jellyfish" (Hagiwara, 2024). What is striking is that the comparison is extremely visual: the jellyfish can be seen before the readers' eyes.

Further on, senses mix. It is well known that, while underwater, we have different sensations and the poem focuses on these in a manner which changes the entire world. Readers are faced with the sensations experienced by the swimmer after starting with the visual impressions of an observer.

The line "The swimmer's eyes hears bells ringing" (Hagiwara, 2024) shows readers traces of synesthesia, when a variety of senses are experienced together. Sight and hearing mix. Further on, reason and imagination mix, in the last line of the poem, "The swimmer's mind sees the moon above water" (Hagiwara, 2024), as the mind begins to see what otherwise is perceived by imagination. It is unlikely that swimming takes place at night, although this is not an impossibility. It is only a bit more rare and unusual. Maybe the swimming happens with the occasion of a pool party, readers can try to find explanations. At the same time, the last line suggests that the mind, while associated with reason, is also the source of imagination. Thinking and imagining coexist, and are not even that separate and different.

We can understand the poem *The Swimmer* as an instance of very careful and detailed perception, taking every detail as an opportunity to slide now and then from reality into fantasy and the other way round.

Readers form free associations (Schachter, 2018) related to swimming, as part of an experience related to personal well-being. Swimming suggests relaxation, as well as an ease to move about.

According to Delmas & Giles (2023), “Phenomenology is a method in which researchers focus on studying human experiences, including the way people conceptualize their lived, shared experiences.” We notice, based on this poem, that readers rely on their own personal perception in relation to the experience of swimming, and this personal perception opens the room for Modernist experimentalism.

In this poem by Hagiwara (2024), we notice the concept of Merleau-Ponty of the body (Crossley, 1996) mentioned in terms of the poem’s interpretation, as a subject and not as an object, allowing readers to interpret and interact with the world. The body in this sense becomes a means of subjective perception, as well as interaction with the world. It is through the body as subject, and not through the body as object, that the swimmer interacts with the world and can offer us readers a glimpse of his experience.

3. FINDINGS

The analysis of the poem *The Swimmer* shows readers how reality and fantasy mix, in a process which can be considered natural, as this is the way we actually perceive reality. Fantasy and reality coexist, as we can always daydream, and as we can always look for the fantastic within common, everyday life reality. We can always find opportunities to slide from everyday life towards fantasy, and towards imaginary realms.

4. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The poem *The Swimmer* by Sakutarō Hagiwara is an example of intertwining of reality and imagination in our everyday lives, based on the way we can look at the swimmer’s body underwater. Water offers us a medium where our perception of reality is challenged. From there, we can easily slide further towards fantasy.

The poem by Hagiwara analysed in this paper is an example not of an uncommon experience, even if the readers can rise above common, everyday life reality through it. Imagination can be considered a natural part of our lives, and to be founded on instances in everyday life reality, from where we can start thinking about a fabulous realm.

The poem by Hagiwara is very visual and has a powerful effect particularly due to its visual impact. It consists of an acute sense of observation, which makes readers slide between fantasy and reality.

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