

**Working Title:** The Mosquito and the Rose: Similar Themes in the Writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Kobayashi Issa

**Project Purpose:** To compare and contrast the themes of childhood found in two of the great master poets of their time: Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe and Kobayashi Issa, drawing conclusions on the impact their upbringings had on their respective works.

**Project Importance:** Although living in two vastly separate worlds, both the beloved Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa and the renowned German author Johann Wolfgang Goethe are considered masters both in their respective countries and the world. However, despite living during the same time period, their works have been not substantially compared in a literary context. This thesis will be one of the first in-depth literary analysis that compare excerpts from both of their bodies of work in the original languages, German and Japanese.

**Project Overview:**

Writing during similar times; in different cultures, neither Goethe nor Issa would have heard of each other during their lifetimes. Issa born in 1763, died in 1828, prior to the ending of the Japanese “Sakoku”, or the opening of the Japanese border to western influences in 1853<sup>1</sup>. Goethe, born in 1749, may have heard rumor of the mysterious closed country, but we have no record of him having any significant interaction with either a Japanese native or one of the few Japanese Dutch Traders allowed to bring goods to port during this time<sup>2</sup>. Germany at the time was experiencing the beginnings of the romantic movement<sup>3</sup>, while Japan was deeply entrenched in the unparalleled Edo period of art and culture<sup>4</sup>.

And yet, despite these vast differences, both Goethe’s and Issa’s respective bodies of work encompass a similar rapture and awe with nature, both as an appreciation of it<sup>5</sup> and a recognition of self<sup>6</sup>. Stemming from vastly different perspectives, backgrounds, cultures and movements, their works cut to the core of human experience.

I propose to conduct a literary analysis and comparison of Goethe’s semi-autobiographical works *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* or “The Sorrows of Young Werther”, as well as excerpts from his *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, his autobiography, and of Issa’s *Oregaharu* or “Spring of My Life”, a collection of Haikus and musings written over different periods of his life. I propose that, despite the differences in both background and experiences as stated above, both masters use nature as a reflection of the human realities around them.

Up to this point, my research has focused primarily on understanding the backgrounds of both Issa and Goethe, and on gaining a deeper knowledge of both of their vast bodies of work.

Both Goethe and Issa were extremely prolific in their writing. Goethe left behind a volume of over a thousand novels, scientific treatises, poetry, and letters<sup>7</sup>, and Issa’s journals

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<sup>1</sup> Ueda, Makoto. *Dew on the grass: the life and poetry of Kobayashi Issa*. Vol. 20. Brill, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Glamann, Kristof. *Dutch-Asiatic Trade 1620–1740*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/German-literature/The-19th-century>

<sup>4</sup> Nishiyama, Matsunosuke. *Edo culture: daily life and diversions in urban Japan, 1600-1868*. University of Hawaii press, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. "Goethe's botanical writings." (1952).

<sup>6</sup> *Cool Melons--turn to Frogs!: The Life and Poems of Issa*. Lee & Low Books, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/German-literature/The-19th-century>

contain nearly 20,000 haiku's<sup>8</sup>. This is quite the daunting body of work for a mere undergraduate! My focus up to this point has thus been on narrowing down what aspects of their works to consider and determining which of their works represent an opportunity to study it further. The thematic similarities of using natural phenomena to describe life experience became clear rather quickly, as demonstrated in a haiku written after the death of Issa's daughter<sup>9</sup>:

露の世は  
露の世ながら  
さりながら

Or, in English:

Dew of the nighttime  
Thick with dew  
Slowly disappears

Although on a different topic, Goethe's also uses nature in his poem *Heiden Röslein*<sup>10</sup> to convey quiet devastation and loss:

Und der wilde Knabe brach  
's Röslein auf der Heiden;  
Röslein wehrte sich und stach,  
Half ihm doch kein Weh und Ach,  
Mußt' es eben leiden.  
Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot,  
Röslein auf der Heiden.

Or, in English:

And the lusty lad did pick  
The blossom on the heath growing;  
Blossom, in defense, did prick,  
'Twas, alas, but a harmless nick,  
Had to be allowing.  
Blossom, blossom, blossom red,  
Blossom on the heath growing<sup>11</sup>.

I include these two examples here because initially, it was the consideration of both of poems that led me to consider further comparisons of Issa and Goethe's works. Further readings of their source materials convinced me that the project was viable.

Further areas that I will pursue as I continue to work on my thesis is considerations of translation issues between the German and Japanese, structural differences between Issa's haikus and Goethe's prose, the various impacts such structures have, and poetic word choice between the two authors.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Issa-Japanese-poet>

<sup>9</sup> Issa, Kobayashi. *The Spring of My Life: And Selected Haiku*. Shambhala Publications, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Goethe, Von. *Heidenroslein*. Pathe, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=6447](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=6447)

**Qualifications of Thesis Committee:** My faculty advisor will be Dr. Tom Spencer of the German department. My faculty reader will be Dr. Marc Yamada of the department of comparative arts and letters. The Honors Coordinator for my department is Mark Purves. I know Dr. Spencer from taking German 303 in the winter semester of 2018. He is an associate professor in the German Department and is extremely qualified to help me with this project. In addition to publishing extensively on the topic of 19<sup>th</sup> century German literature, his educational training is in Comparative literature. One danger of conducting a comparative project between works by two vastly different authors is drawing conclusions or comparisons that are not actually valid to make. Dr. Spencer will be able to both guide my thinking and help me prevent such catastrophes. On recommendation from Dr. Spencer and Dr. Watabe in the Japanese department, I approached Dr. Yamada, an associate professor from the Comparative Arts and Letters department to serve as my faculty reader. With such a comparative thesis, it is vital that I have a reader who can critique my rendering and analysis of Issa's poetry. Dr. Yamada is extremely qualified to help me do this as a reader. In addition to his prolific publications on the topic of modern Japanese literature and culture, his background in Japanese literature and experience with comparative studies will be invaluable during the reading process.

**Timeline:**

The process of research continuing here is as follows:

October 2018: Continue to consider the works of Issa and Goethe; consider specific nature themes to note

November-December 2018: Begin separate in depth analysis of prospective works

January-February 2019: Finish comparative analysis and begin final draft writing processes.

March 2019: Finish Written Drafts working with faculty reader.

April 2019: Defend Thesis    *Last day to defend is March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.*

**IRB:** None

**Funding:** Not applicable

**Culmination Experience:** Still determining; Ideally publication.