

HAIKU

Haiku is a traditional Japanese form of poetry that has enjoyed popularity in America for more than 100 years. There are many misconceptions about the translation of haiku from one culture to another. In a nutshell let us explore what is and is not Haiku.

The idea is to write about one scene or one event using nature to stir a feeling or thought. Do not tell the reader what to think or feel; recreate the scene so the reader can have his or her own thoughts or feelings. You are not saying, "I saw a forest fire. It was so exciting!" You are tapping the reader on the shoulder and pointing at the fire, drawing their attention to it so they can have their own reaction. Haiku almost never includes feeling words like sad or happy. It allows the reader to have his or her own feelings. It creates an emotionally charged scene or moment through vivid imagery.

Haiku is always in present tense. Though it attempts to recreate anew on paper a moment that has passed, it is not something that happened yesterday, it is happening now. By recreating the moment in present tense you draw the reader into the moment more intensely.

In Japanese Buddhism this is called a small satori. Satori is a state of blissful enlightenment when you are one with the universe. A small satori is an Aha! moment when things seem to make sense, you become more aware. Haiku attempts to recreate that Aha! moment. The reader is asked to put forth some effort of mindfulness to enter that flash of insight.

There is also an element of surprise in most haiku. The first line or two draws a picture and the third line is a pointer that draws our attention to the object or scene or event that creates the small satori. Because of this element of surprise there is often an element of Yin-Yang, the ancient Chinese idea that opposites balance. Maybe the poem starts with a wide brush and then ends with a microscopic view, large to small, or it could open with a dark scene and draw your attention to a point of light. It could be a noisy scene with a quiet moment or a calm moment with a crisis erupting. When writing or reading haiku look for the Yin-Yang balance and the element of surprise.


Though human nature is often implied, haiku is about nature, not nature as a metaphor for human life but pure unadulterated, un-interpreted nature. Haiku is an attempt to see the natural world, as it is, not as an analogy for human experience. It is left to the readers to make their own metaphorical interpretation. A haiku poet, like a scientist, is a careful, thoughtful observer of the details of the natural world. There is also a season word, a clue about what season it is, to add another layer to the possible interpretation. Snow is clearly a clue that it is winter. Cherry blossoms imply spring and a grasshopper means it is summer. Chrysanthemums imply that it is fall. (You could make a chart of key words that imply each season.) Because of the brevity and density of haiku a season word is a powerful way to allude to a host of seasonal conditions with one word.

Though haiku is brief it is not always 5-7-5 syllables. This is one of the most common misconceptions that even a lot of scholars disagree on. In Japanese they count “onji,” which are word sounds, not syllables. They are more like phonemes. For example, tax has one syllable but four phonemes: t-a-k-s. The goal in haiku is brevity, 15 or 20 syllables in two or three lines. When writing haiku you want to leave out all the flowery terms and boil it down to terse almost telegraphic language.

Following are several of my favorite haiku. Look for each of these characteristics in each of these poems: present tense, small satori, element of surprise, yin-yang, season word, and syllable count:

frog

 r o
 f g
 frog



By Marlene Mountain

A Rainbow!
all the colors are visible
in the dragonfly’s wing

By Brian “Fox” Ellis



a bubble
floating in the air
pop!

By Desiree Edwards (age 10)

this baby is soft
this baby is cuddly
this baby pees too much

By Angela Sass (age 9)



suicidal gnat
kamikaze in my eye
my tear ducts water

By Brian “Fox” Ellis



the alarm clock is
ringing wildly – while the
morning glory blooms

By Brian “Fox” Ellis

between sidewalk
and skyscraper
a dandelion conceals
the cricket’s song

By Brian “Fox” Ellis