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THOUGHTS ON HAIKU FOR ALL KINDS OF WRITERS

*Greetings, Writers! Below is the full text of a guest post I wrote for a writers’ blog. The post ended up much shorter and in a Q and A format, but some folks might want more background, examples, and depth, so I’m adding this to my website. Thanks for reading!*

There’s much to learn about this deceptively simple genre, its history, and its widespread manifestations among language lovers across the globe. I am very much still a student.

Why is haiku worth your attention? One, its intrinsic value - I think reading and writing haiku make a person of any age more alive. Two, immersing yourself in these short form poems can sharpen your writing skills across other genres.

First, let’s get the 5-7-5 question out of the way. While strong haiku can be written in this format, it’s not an accurate reflection of Japanese haiku structure. Japanese words generally contain more syllable sounds than English words do, so 17 syllables in English are usually a few too many for one haiku – often leading to a clunky, forced-sounding poem.

I would also argue that any clever arrangement of words following a 5-7-5 pattern on a blank page does not a haiku make. [I know you might have been taught this in school, like I was, and – *sigh* – haiku is often still presented this way to students.] Why not?

Well, a haiku is much more than words counted on fingers and written in three lines. (You’ll find several structural variations in contemporary English language haiku journals, for instance – one-line haiku, or monoku, among them.) Structure aside, there is just so much more packed into these small poems. Regarding terms, many publications don’t separate *haiku* from *senryū –* haiku has traditionally referred to a poem dealing with nature, and senryū to a poem dealing with human nature. Many poems nod to both.

Let me share a few words of wisdom from our immediate past president of the Haiku Society of America, Dr. David G. Lanoue, <http://haikuguy.com/issa/aboutme.html> , the RosaMary Professor of English at [Xavier University of Louisiana](http://www.xula.edu/) in New Orleans and long-time Issa Scholar. [Koboyashi Issa (1763-1828) is a recognized haiku master along with “founding father”Bashō (1644-94), [Buson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yosa_Buson) (1716-83), and [Shiki](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masaoka_Shiki) (1867-1902).]

On Dr. Lanoue’s website <http://haikuguy.com/issa/abouthaiku.html> , you’ll find this great little definition of a haiku: “a one-breath poem that discovers connection.”

Connection between two juxtaposed images/ideas is what’s often missing in much of what passes as “haiku” in popular culture. In the introduction to Lanoue’s recent book, ISSA AND THE MEANING OF ANIMALS: A BUDDHIST POET’S PERSPECTIVE (2014), he writes that a haiku “is an elliptical, succinct, imagistic poem that invites readers to complete with their imaginations what is only suggested or hinted at on the page.”

Now that’s a mouthful, but let’s break it down with help from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com> Caveat: this is solely my interpretation, and subject to flaws. Elliptical can mean “characterized by extreme economy of expression in speech or writing.” *(*Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary, 2010*.)* Also, “very condensed or concise, often so as to be obscure or ambiguous” *(*Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, 1991-2003.)*

A haiku is very economical: *Check*. Condensed: *Check.* Ambiguous: *Can be.*

Succinct can mean “characterized by clear, precise expression in few words; concise and terse.” (American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition, *2011.)*

Clear, precise, concise - Another *check*.

Imagistic hearkens to “a poetic movement in England and America between 1912 and 1917, initiated chiefly by Ezra Pound, advocating the use of ordinary speech and the precise presentation of images.” *(*Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged,1991-*2003)*

Ordinary speech and the precise presentation of images – *Check.*

[Click here <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/ezra-pound> for more on our friend Ezra, and here <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/station-metro> for his famous two-line poem, “In a Station of the Metro.”]

What about the rest of the description – a poem that “invites readers to complete with their imaginations what is only suggested or hinted at on the page”? Ahh, that’s the fun part.

I hope David doesn’t mind my presenting one of his own haiku, which he graciously shared in an interview on my blog <http://www.robynhoodblack.com/blog.htm?post=938974> in December 2013.

**a "Lost Dog" sign
nailed deep
into the oak**

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*Frogpond* 27.2 (2004)

First, note the word choices. Are any of them sentimental or sappy? Nope. Too high-falutin’ to understand? No. Are precise image/sensory details presented? Yes.

Does this poem resonate with you? If you have a dog, certainly if you’ve ever lost a dog, it likely strikes a chord. Where does your imagination take you in these nine words?

Each reader will approach a haiku differently, and bring his or her own experiences and sensibilities. But a successful haiku will make a connection between two images within it and also connect on some level with the reader or listener. When I read this poem, that nail might as well be pounded right into my heart, because that’s where I would feel the loss of one of my beloved dogs. Also, notice how much stronger the poem is with the specific word “oak” (even the heavy, hearty sound of that word, the way you must slow down to say it) than it would have been if Lanoue had written, “tree.”

Wait – I see a nod! You’re thinking about how this same attention to precision works in fiction and nonfiction, too, right? Which brings me to another wonderful aspect of haiku with regard to writing in general: Show, Don’t Tell. We’ve all heard this how many times??

A strong haiku presents the reader with a moment, an experience, but doesn’t override the reader’s response by naming the emotions involved. The unfolding of the second image, sometimes in a surprising way, seals the connection and opens the emotional potential of the poem.

What if this poem went something like, “a ‘Lost Dog’ sign/taped up/to the sign post.” Hmm. Not as much happening there. Or, “a ‘Lost Dog’sign/I sorely miss/my golden retriever.” That option sorely misses the mark.

As it is written, though, I’m grabbed first by the visual image of the “lost” sign – *Oh, No! That’s terrible!,* I think to myself*…* and then pounded with the second image – a nail, or nails, driven with force into the hard oak tree. I hear a hammer, feel the rough bark, even sense the impact of that nail. *This dog means a lot to whoever hammered that sign,* I think. *How would I feel if I lost my dog?*

Now - Ready to write some haiku of your own?

Another adage we writers hear all the time comes into play, too: READ. When I first fell under the spell of haiku, I had to read hundreds and hundreds of them to start getting a sense of what they were really about. And certainly before I could write any that were up to snuff for publication. (And, confession – I still write plenty that are not.) Good news is, there are many resources out there for you to dive into. Check out the Haiku Society of America <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/> , and their journal *Frogpond*. The Haiku Foundation <http://www.thehaikufoundation.org/> is a treasure trove, and they even offer an app full of contemporary haiku you can keep handy on your phone! You might also like Jane Reichhold’s “Bare Bones School of Haiku” <http://www.ahapoetry.com/Bare%20Bones/bbtoc%20intro.html> at her AHA Poetry site <http://www.ahapoetry.com/>.

Some of the many haiku books on my bookshelf include works by David G. Lanoue and Jane Reichhold, and standards such as THE HAIKU HANDBOOK by William J. Higginson with Penny Harter, THE HAIKU ANTHOLOGY by Cor Van den Heuvel, AN INTRODUCTION TO HAIKU by Harold G. Henderson, THE ESSENTIAL HAIKU *– Versions of Bashō, Busson, & Issa* by Rober Hass, HAIKU IN ENGLISH – THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS by Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland and Allan Burns, and reprints of some of the classic R.H. Blyth HAIKU volumes.

Looking for something a little lighter to set your day off on an inspirational foot? Try Patricia Donegan’s HAIKU MIND.

You can subscribe to the journals, such as *Frogpond, Modern Haiku*, *Acorn*, and *bottlerockets*, among many others, and you can enjoy several online, including *The Heron’s Nest* and *A Hundred Gourds*. Be sure to visit Red Moon Press <http://www.redmoonpress.com/> to peruse anthology offerings. Many terrific English language online journals are published in other countries as well.

You certainly don’t have to read all these things before you write some haiku! But dip into a few of them to find inspiration and let the rhythm of haiku start seeping into your bones.

If you’d like to tackle a three-line English language haiku, try this. Next time you go for a walk outside, take your notebook. Or sit on your front stoop or in your back yard. You can use the little “Notes” option on your phone, too, but I’m old school – I much prefer the scratch of pen or pencil against paper, and who knows if the urge to sketch something will strike?

Somewhere outside, simply slow down. Gather your senses. What catches your eye? Your ear? Is there a warm wind or cool breeze? What is the time of day, the season? Traditional Japanese haiku include a “season” word; many of these are culturally understood to imply a certain time of year. (Cherry blossoms = spring, for instance.)

You are gathering two parts for your haiku – one will be two lines and one will be a single line. Traditionally the second line is the longest, but don’t fret about that for now. It doesn’t matter which part is first or second, though you should probably play with each option to see which makes a stronger poem. One of your two elements could be a seasonal reference – it might be as straightforward as “autumn afternoon,” or it might be more subtle – “the smell of burning leaves.”

Say you’re out in your yard and catch that familiar fall whiff. What does the smell of burning leaves evoke for you? A loss, or a change, something you regret or miss? The trick is to wrangle some words together to suggest that feeling or experience, without coming right out and saying it. You are leaving room for your reader to participate in your two images as well. Maybe you also notice geese flying overhead. Maybe they switch positions in their V.

You might jot down –

the smell of burning leaves

Geese in a V

change positions

Well, that doesn’t roll off the tongue, does it? Scalpel, please.

Notice the long-e assonance in “leaves,” “V,” and “geese.” Poetic devices are generally avoided in haiku, but if they slip in naturally and don’t take over the poem, a light touch is welcome. So let’s say you decide to keep these.

You might play with the lines to make them more concise. Precise. But leave a shimmering bit of ambiguity in what the images could suggest. Maybe you decide you don’t really need “the smell of,” since the words “burning leaves” will likely convey that singular smell.

burning leaves

Geese in a V

change positions

It’s more interesting, anyway. Now the reader wonders about the connection between those consumed/destroyed leaves and the shifts in the geese formation. Might a family be re-configuring itself? Has there been a death or separation? Is someone shifting into a new role?

But the last two lines are awkward. Is there a more concise way to get across that idea of a change in flight positions? Economize those flapping geese?

burning leaves

a V of geese

regroups

Better? After those easy breezy “e” sounds, we clunk into the word “regroups,” which is appropriate. That word opens more possibilities to a corresponding human social experience.

If it were me, at this point in my haiku excursion, I’d probably leave this poem alone and let it “cure” for a bit – a few days, at least – and then revisit it to see if I think it works as is or needs more work. I’d keep my senses and mind open to other images for poems, though – and jot them down. Even fragments might show up in a later haiku, next time I’m out on a haiku walk.

By the way, students love going on haiku walks, or “ginkos.” The Haiku Foundation has an extensive list with links to educational resources for students of all ages <http://www.thehaikufoundation.org/the-haiku-foundation-education-wall/> . Included down the page are some lesson plans from Tom Painting, Language Arts teacher at The Paideia School in Atlanta, whose students have been featured many times on my blog. I find in school visits that kids enjoy haiku and come up with enlightening poems, especially with generous doses of encouragement and freedom to create.

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*Robyn Hood Black writes poetry, fiction and nonfiction under Spanish moss in the South Carolina Lowcountry. She’s active in SCBWI Southern Breeze (even though she technically crossed the regional border) and served as Southeast Regional Coordinator of the Haiku Society of America in 2016-17. Her haiku have appeared in many contemporary journals including* Frogpond, Modern Haiku, The Heron’s Nest,Acorn, *and* bottle rockets. *Her poems for children appear in many anthologies and magazines. She blogs each Poetry Friday at* [*http://www.robynhoodblack.com/blog.htm*](http://www.robynhoodblack.com/blog.htm) *and she also has an art business/Etsy shop featuring “literary art with a vintage vibe” –* [*http://etsy.com/shop/artsyletters*](http://etsy.com/shop/artsyletters) *.*