

## An Introduction to Haiku & Senryu for New Haiku & Senryu Poets

by Curtis Dunlap

This blog post comes with a warning: Once you open your “haiku eye”, it never closes. In fact, I dreamed in haiku once and I know of at least one other haiku poet who has dreamed in haiku. The dream was sort of like a musical but without music. Every word spoken, every poet in the dream communicated via haiku! It was a wonderfully pleasant dream. But I digress...

Okay, back to the “haiku eye”: You will start noticing small things that will stand out in your mind, a blade of grass swaying in the wind, bird songs, raindrops striking a puddle... Not everything I witness or observe becomes a haiku. Occasionally, a free verse poem will take shape from a haiku “moment” (an added benefit of the “haiku eye” that I did not expect).

So, what are haiku? In a nutshell, haiku are one-breath poems; they are picture poems. The haiku poet uses words to paint a picture without adding personal thought or feelings to the poem. In haiku the poet must “show, don’t tell”. Strong haiku can evoke an emotional response in the reader, an extraordinarily wonderful thing to experience when reading these concise poems.

The Japanese sound unit called an onji does not equal an English syllable. Japanese haiku sound units are written in a 5-7-5 format (again Japanese sound units, not English syllables). When English poets began writing haiku they would write in three lines of 5-7-5 syllables. Now, since an onji does not equal an English syllable, an English haiku tends to be longer than a Japanese haiku. Experts on the subject have determined that a 17 onji haiku in Japanese should be about a 12 to 15 syllable poem in English.

Poet Jack Kerouac seldom wrote 5-7-5 haiku. Kerouac’s haiku are one-breath poems. Personally, I have always thought that it was better to use the best word or words for the poem. Trying to fit a word into a haiku to meet a syllable quota is akin to putting a square peg in a round hole.

Does that mean you should not write haiku in 5-7-5? No, many people are content to write in that format; however, I personally find it less stressful to write in the freer “one-breath” style. It does not cramp my creativity. I have a few poems written as 5-7-5, but it was never my intention to write 5-7-5 haiku. I just penned the poems, let the words flow and they unintentionally became 5-7-5 haiku.

Now, let's talk about kigo (kee-go). Kigo is a seasonal reference in haiku. You can explicitly mention the season as in this poem of mine:

empty house –  
a whisper of mother's voice  
in the autumn wind

Museum of Haiku Literature Award  
Frogpond Volume XXXI:1 - Winter 2008

or this poem:

spring planting –  
a redbird offers a seed  
to his mate

The Heron's Nest VII:3 - 9, 2005

Autumn and spring are the seasonal references (kigo) in the two poems.

You can also imply the season, by using an image to suggest a season. Can you guess the time of year for this poem?

tall tales in the shade –  
grandpa shifts his tobacco  
to the other cheek

Notes from the Gean Issue 1 - 2009

or this poem:

bustling shoppers –  
the bell ringer's  
prosthetic hand

The Heron's Nest X:4 - 12, 2008

Tobacco growing season is a spring or summer kigo. If you guess Christmas for the second poem, you are correct! Christmas is a winter kigo.

You can also use animals and plant life to suggest a season:

a gray cubicle –  
cicada songs  
through a speaker phone

The Heron's Nest VI:9, 2004

fog rising –  
mushrooms push aside  
a bed of pine needles

The Heron's Nest VI:11, 2004

Cicadas suggest summer. Fog and mushrooms suggest autumn.

The Japanese take kigo very seriously in haiku, creating entire collections of season words called a saijiki that include wildlife, plants, weather etc. and how or when they should be used in haiku. (William J. Higginson compiled the first international saijiki, entitled *Haiku World*.)

Let's talk about juxtaposition. Reread the above poems. Did you notice that I used an em dash to separate two sections of the poems? This is done for contrast. Haiku invite the reader to participate in the poem. It is up to the reader to make the connection between the contrasting images. Neat, eh? You and I may read the same haiku; however, it may resonate within you and have a different meaning for you than it does for me. That is a concept that took a while for me to understand.

Okay, back to juxtaposition. There are other ways to separate the two parts of the poem. I have seen poets use a comma, colon, or ellipses as in this poem:

autumn rain  
peppers the sand . . .  
a missing toe's phantom itch

Frogpond Volume XXVII:3 (Nov. 2004)

Notice also that I separated the second and third lines whereas I separated the first and second lines in the earlier poems. By the way, I have all my toes. The above poem is what I call an "empathy haiku". I wrote a short article for Modern Haiku that describes empathy haiku. The article is also available at the following URL:

<http://tobaccoroadpoet.blogspot.com/2009/07/when-empathy-leads-to-haiku.html>

Another haiku technique is to not use anything to separate the contrasting images in a haiku, leaving it up to the reader to decide:

sunset across the field

afterglow  
of a full day's work

Frogpond Volume 31:2 - Spring/Summer 2008

Sometimes there is no sharp cut between the two images, the haiku might read as a one breath sentence as in this poem:

up with the rooster  
tending her tomato plants  
the childless widow

NCHS Anthology Commemorating HNA 2007

One-line haiku are popular. Here is one of my one-line haiku:

rain drops changing the tone of river stones

Modern Haiku Volume 39.1 - Winter/Spring 2008

By the way, I intentionally penned "rain drops" instead of raindrops...implying "rain falls"...oh, and the rhyme was unintentional. Haiku do not rhyme. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule.

That is haiku in a nutshell. Now, let's move onto senryu. Senryu are structurally like haiku, but where haiku are about nature or nature linked to the human condition, senryu are about human nature. Check out these poems:

after the burial . . .  
my father's smile  
on so many faces

The Heron's Nest VIII:4 - 12, 2006

country store –  
two old-timers whittle  
over world affairs

The Heron's Nest VI:8, 2004

outside the planetarium  
a senior couple share  
a doobie

Notes from the Gean Issue 1 - 2009

karaoke night –  
a barfly dances  
with the wallflower

Frogpond Volume XXX:2 (June 2007)

Did you notice that there are no seasonal references? The above poems are about human nature.

Senryu can be poignant, satirical, and humorous as in this poem by the lovely Hortensia Anderson:

celibacy—  
sounded like a fine idea  
until that last beer . . .

Prune Juice: Journal of Senryu and Kyoka (Winter 2009)

Another one of my senryu published in a recent issue of Prune Juice:

plucking hair  
from my ears  
she loves me, she loves me not

Prune Juice Issue 6 - Summer 2011

Okay, that is a crash course in Americanized versions of Japanese poetic forms. The absolute best thing that I recommend for you to do is to read a lot of haiku and senryu. Saturate your brain with haiku and senryu by other poets and, before long, you will start thinking and composing your own poems. Your “haiku eye” will switch on and stay on. You will look for haiku and senryu and they will, quite often, find you!

I recommend:

Patricia Donegan on Chiyo-ni's "Way of Haiku"

<http://www.akaihana.com/Chiyo-ni.htm>

The Heron's Nest (has over a decade of haiku online)

<http://www.theheronsnest.com/>

Modern Haiku (has a few sample poems/issues online)

<http://modernhaiku.org/>

Frogpond (journal of The Haiku Society of America...a few samples online)

<http://www.hsa-haiku.org/frogpond/index.html>

Prune Juice (electronic edition online)

<http://prunejuice.wordpress.com/journal/>

Magnapoets

<http://magnapoets.com/>

Jane Reichhold's Haiku page: <http://www.ahapoetry.com/haiku.htm>

I also recommend *The Haiku Handbook* by William J. Higginson and Penny Harter.

There are dozens of other haiku links and journals listed on my blog or web site.

<http://tobaccoroadpoet.blogspot.com>

<http://tobaccoroadpoet.com>

And finally, if you require a little more room to convey an experience in a poem, check out tanka. Tanka are longer than haiku (five lines) and you have the freedom to add personal thought or feeling.

<http://tobaccoroadpoet.com/tanka.html>

Happy Haikuing!