

Essays

Repetition in Haiku¹

by Brad Bennett

As haiku poets, we bring a rich variety of approaches, aesthetic considerations, and writing techniques to each poem we write. Repetition is one of the many dynamic tools in the haiku poet's toolbox. Repeating words, or parts of words, can be an effective and successful strategy as we craft our haiku. Historically, using repetition in English-language haiku has often been discouraged. In fact, repetition has been included on some lists of "haiku don'ts." But throughout its long history, Japanese and English-language haiku have been written about various forms of repetition that occur in the natural world. What are *kigo* if they are not time markers that tap into our collective experience and knowledge of the seasons and other natural cycles, born of repetition? So, we owe it to our haiku ancestors, our natural world, and ourselves to examine the literary benefits of repetition in our beloved form.

Repetition is a common and important device in all forms of poetry. As poet and critic Edward Hirsch has said, "Meaning accrues through repetition. One of the deep fundamentals of poetry is the recurrence of sounds, syllables, words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. Repetition can be one of the most intoxicating features of poetry. It creates expectations, which can be fulfilled or frustrated."² But how does repetition work in a haiku? What resonating or intoxicating effects can the haiku poet create through repetition?

Repetition can occur in various ways in a haiku. For the purposes of this article, we will examine the repetition of words and phrases, not the repetition of sounds or phonemes that are part and parcel of devices like alliteration, consonance, and assonance. The haiku writer can decide to repeat subsets of a haiku—a word, a couple of words, a clause, a fragment, or a whole line. Repetition can also occur using different parts of speech—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions.

Like rhyme, repetition is very noticeable in a haiku. There are so few words, and the writer is choosing to repeat a high percentage of them. Thus, repetition creates some very strong effects, especially through sound, rhythm, and emphasis. First and foremost, repeating a word or phrase draws the reader's attention to the sounds that are repeated, as if the poet were beating on a drum. Repetition in a haiku implores the reader to read the poem aloud. Repeating phrases can also enhance the rhythm of a haiku. Sometimes, repetition can create a chant-like rhythm that can enhance the content and entrance the reader. Or it can also work like the repeated lines in a blues song. Most importantly, and perhaps most obviously, repetition creates stress and emphasis. "Repeated words are powerful; they assert themselves, insist on our attention."³ When a writer repeats a word or words in a haiku, the reader sits up and takes notice. Repetition can also help to unify the poem by stressing a theme or sewing parts of the poem together. Finally, in the words of haiku poet vince tripi, "repetition brings energy and the possibility of drawing the Reader into direct participation with the poem."⁴ So, repetition can deepen the meaning of a haiku through sound, rhythm, emphasis, unification, and energy.

As noted above, using repetition in such a short form as a haiku is very noticeable. We don't want the repetition to be distracting for the reader. We also don't want it to be too cute, sentimental, clever, or cliché. If there is too much repetition in the poem, it can lose its impact. Ultimately, we need to use repetition carefully and deftly. We should aim for resonance, not redundancy—resonance that invites the reader to stay in the moment and feel it more deeply; emphasis, not impact—emphasis that guides the reader rather than yanking them along. Your poem shouldn't sound like a broken record, unless that's the effect you're looking for.

There are subtle ways we can use repetition carefully that can help a haiku resonate rather than sound redundant. For instance, if part of one word or phrase is slightly different from the other, the repetition tends to be less distracting. For example, this next poem includes two different compound nouns that include the word "moon," and the slight variety creates a connecting and unifying effect. The repetitive sound of "moon" mimics the howls of the coyotes:

moonflowers
reflecting moonlight
coyote voices

Ferris Gilli⁵

In this next haiku, the word “dark” is repeated, although the second instance serves as a root word with an added suffix. Adding the suffix the second time lessens the redundancy while intensifying the darkness:

dark darker
too many stars
too far

Gary Hotham⁶

Another way to use repetition deftly is to change the part of speech of a word. For instance, you can use the same word as both a noun and a verb, as in the following haiku:

inside the frozen waterfall water falling

Julie Warther [Schwerin]⁷

The word “fall” is first part of a compound noun, “waterfall,” and later used within the verb “falling.” Similarly, the word “water” appears in two different forms, the first as part of a compound noun. These effects contribute to emphasize the intertwined nature of ice and water in a winter waterfall.

Repetition can also play with multiple meanings of the same word. For instance, some haiku utilize *antanaclasis*, the successive repetition of a word, in which each use has a different meaning. Often, the same word acts as two separate parts of speech, usually a noun and a verb, as in this example:

first day of summer
the rope swing swings
above the river

*Anna Maris*⁸

Repetition is not a strategy that's new to twenty-first century haiku by any means. If you have read haiku by the Japanese masters, you'll know that repetition was not uncommon. In the following haiku, Bashō uses repetition as a method of observing and counting as he walks through the countryside:

kazoe ki nu yashiki yashiki no ume yanagi

counting as I go
villa by villa
plum and willows

*Bashō*⁹

In this next haiku, Chiyo-ni repeats the onomatopoeic Japanese name for “cuckoo.” The translators explicitly call attention to the reiteration:

hototogisu hototogisu akeni keri

Repeating
hototogisu, hototogisu—
the day dawned

*Chiyo-ni*¹⁰

In his famous haiku below, Issa emphasizes the plodding speed of a snail by repeating the word *soro*, which Robert Hass translates as “slowly”:

katatsuburi soro-soro nobore fuji no yama

Climb Mount Fuji,
O Snail,
but slowly, slowly.

*Issa*¹¹

While repetition has been utilized many times in the Japanese haiku written over the last four centuries, I am interested in examining how it works in contemporary English-language haiku. Let's first examine three classic English-language haiku that employ repetition. In these first two, Nicholas Virgilio and Vincent Tripi both utilize a technique that Richard Gilbert calls "symmetrical rhythmic substitution." This term refers to "word substitutions occurring in symmetrically repeated rhythmic patterns . . . the symmetrical substitution evokes a quality of superposition (image layering) and jump-cut, filmic 'snapshot' action."¹² These two poems are also examples of *anaphora*, repetition at the beginnings of lines or clauses. In the third haiku, Ruth Yarrow emphasizes the quiet and beauty of the garden by repeating "the garden."

lily:
out of the water . . .
out of itself

*Nicholas Virgilio*¹³

letting
the cat in
the fog in

*vincent tripi*¹⁴

after the garden party the garden

*Ruth Yarrow*¹⁵

So, what can repetition do when carefully applied by the haiku writer? Repetition can act in a variety of ways and create a variety of effects. We will next take a look at examples of eleven effects that repetition can produce in haiku: (1) resonance, (2) joy and wonder, (3) the intensification of an image, (4) an emotion, (5) an experience, (6) repeated sounds or motions, (7) juxtaposition that enhances similarities and differences, (8) completing the circle, (9) endlessness, (10) measurement, and (11) humor.

(1) RESONANCE

As mentioned earlier, one of the major effects of repetition is to create resonance in a haiku. The repetition creates a rhythm that can act like waves that linger long after one has finished reading the poem.

bird shadow
from tree shadow
to fence shadow

*Christopher Herold*¹⁶

The multiple shadows in Herold's haiku create a kind of rippling effect. This next haiku creates resonance through the repetition of the word "sound":

yellow starthistle
the sound of the sound
barrier breaking

*Chuck Brickley*¹⁷

(2) JOY AND WONDER

The haiku, as Scott Mason asserts in his wonderful book *The Wonder Code*, is a poem of wonder. Wonderment, joy, and gratitude can be created and/or affirmed by using repetition. In the words of poet Florence Vilén, "The repetition may express pure joy, the exuberance of seeing the abundance of nature."¹⁸

warm breeze
watching your eyes
watch a butterfly

*Jeannie Martin*¹⁹

In addition to the wonder in Martin's poem, the repetition of the word "watch" directs the reader to watch the watchers. We're all in this world together.

a poppy.
a field of poppies!
the hills blowing with poppies!

*Michael McClintock*²⁰

Check out the unusual punctuation in McClintock's joyful haiku, including the repetition of exclamation points!

(3) INTENSIFICATION OF IMAGE

As noted above, repetition brings significant emphasis to a specific portion of a haiku. This emphasis can intensify an image, emotion, or experience. In the following two haiku, the reader's focus is directed to the intensified images of light on lilies and the color red.

in changing light lilies changing light

*Michele Root-Bernstein*²¹

a red truck stops
at a red stop sign—
end of summer

*Mimi Ahern*²²

(4) INTENSIFICATION OF EMOTION

Sometimes, the resonance that repetition creates is a kind of emotional intensification. This is one of the most dramatic and memorable effects of repetition. The following haiku by Joan Torres is intensely sad, an emotion that is evoked by repeating the word "missing":

below the missing dog the missing woman

*Joan Torres*²³

Firsts and lasts are always significant, and the inclusion of both in the following haiku with the repetition of "as if it were" stresses the importance of each moment of our lives. It also gives this poem a

strong sense of *mono no aware*, an empathic awareness of the transience of life:

touching this crocus
as if it were the first
as if it were the last

*Michele L. Harvey*²⁴

Repetition can help the writer intensify a variety of emotions, such as tranquility, fear, or frustration:

quiet
within the quiet
a copse of cedars

*Hannah Mahoney*²⁵

awake
in the dark
the darkness

*Bill Kenney*²⁶

autumn afternoon
up a ladder, down a ladder
move a ladder

*Alan S. Bridges*²⁷

If repetition has been used to intensify one emotion in the first two lines of a haiku, it can then be contrasted with another emotion in the third line. In this next poem, by Peggy Lyles, the repetition creates an emotional intensity in the first two lines that is contrasted with the fragment's lighter mood in the last line:

a cold cup
from a cold cupboard
morning sun

*Peggy Lyles*²⁸

(5) INTENSIFICATION OF EXPERIENCE

Processes and experiences can also get intensified by using repetition.

canyon wall
what a river did
to what an ocean did

*Alan S. Bridges*²⁹

birthday breakfast—
jazz tune after jazz tune
as the heater heats

*Lenard D. Moore*³⁰

The repetition of one jazz tune after another and the heater heating up both accentuate our experience of one birthday after another.

(6) REPEATED SOUNDS AND MOTIONS

As Alexander Pope asserts, “The sound must seem an echo to the sense.”³¹ The repeated sounds of words can mimic the sounds within the haiku moment.

song sparrow
more more more
marsh marigolds

*Brad Bennett*³²

Repetition can also describe a repeated motion or action, thereby emphasizing it and directing the reader’s attention to its importance.

sharp wind
the metal gate bangs shut
bangs shut

*Jim Kacian*³³

foxglove
 a bumblebee bounces off
 a bumblebee backing out

*Chuck Brickley*³⁴

(7) JUXTAPOSITION: SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

Juxtaposition is essential in haiku, and repetition can sometime accentuate similarities and differences between the entities that are being juxtaposed. It seems paradoxical to say that you can use replication to call attention to difference, but if you reuse the same phrase and change one word, it focuses attention on the differences between the two parts. It can invert ideas for emphasis or disjunction. Richard Gilbert's strategy of "symmetrical rhythmic substitution" is a very apt way to accomplish this, as noticed in the following haiku:

did you see that?
 did I see that?
 falling star

*Jeannie Martin*³⁵

it's only february comes after it's only january

*Marlene Mountain*³⁶

fork in the trail
 fork in the river
 fork in the swallow's tail

*vincent tripi*³⁷

Repetition can also identify and accentuate an association or a congruence in a haiku's juxtaposition. In accentuating the difference, we can call attention to our commonalities:

my body
 his body
 plum afternoon

*Kristen Deming*³⁸

(8) COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

By using a word or phrase at the beginning and end of a haiku, one can complete a kind of intra-poem circle. This can contribute to unifying the poem in an effective way. In Cooper's haiku, "sand" at the beginning and end emphasizes the rock cycle. In Yovu's poem, the phrase "slips into" occurs near the beginning and at the end of the poem. In conjunction with the repetition of the word "ocean" on line two, it helps the reader hear and feel the continuous cycle of wave upon wave upon wave. The multiple examples of repetition in Hall's haiku create concentric circles.

sand
into sandstone
into sand

*Bill Cooper*³⁹

she slips into
the ocean the ocean
slips into

*Peter Yovu*⁴⁰

barn swallows swallowed by the barn

*Carolyn Hall*⁴¹

(9) ENDLESSNESS

New Zealand poet Dick Whyte has said that "many haiku employ an element of repetition to suggest a kind of 'endlessness.'"⁴² Sometimes, we don't want the circle to be completed in our haiku. We want the reader to experience a feeling of endlessness or infinity. Repetition can help us achieve that:

knitting
late into the night
stars upon stars upon stars

*Jeannie Martin*⁴³

the river's mouth
no end to the end
of the journey

*Michele Root-Bernstein*⁴⁴

The endlessness in a haiku can be a reflection on the human condition, or a kind of existential look at ourselves. In this way, repetition can create a mobius strip effect, a meta-cognitive examination, an intriguing paradox . . .

letting go
of letting go . . .
wild blackberries

*Victor Ortiz*⁴⁵

windfall apples
what I think about
what I think

*Carolyn Hall*⁴⁶

Or a haiku can have an inside-out effect. The following poem completes the circle, using the word “rush” at the beginning and at the end; repeats the word “summer”; and uses the assonance of the long e sounds of “reeds” and “leaves” to invert the reader:

the rush
of summer reeds
the leaves of summer rushes

*Janet Jiahui Wu*⁴⁷

(10) MEASUREMENT

Repeated words, along with the prepositions between them (such as ‘by’), can create a sequence or way to measure something. One can measure distance or time:

a banana slug
inch by inch by inch
giant sequoias

*Karina Young*⁴⁸

one by one
the house lights follow me
to bed

*Mary Stevens*⁴⁹

(11) HUMOR AND IRONY

Any wag will tell you that repetition is a very effective way to achieve irony and humor. Say something again and again, and it can become funny or droll. Senryu authors know this lesson well:

spring equinox
too pregnant to sit
too pregnant to stand

*Tia Haynes*⁵⁰

judging
a haiku contest
judging myself

*Brad Bennett*⁵¹

As the examples in this essay confirm, the skillful use of repetition in haiku can create a variety of helpful effects. When used carefully, repetition can add to the sound, rhythm, energy, unity, and meaning of a haiku. It's a handy and highly effective tool for haiku poets to have in our toolboxes.

when sunlight
becomes moonlight
an owl's echo

*Brad Bennett*⁵²

Brad Bennett, a former elementary school teacher, now teaches haiku to adults. He has published three collections of haiku with Red Moon Press: (1) a drop of pond (2016), which won a Touchstone Distinguished Book Award from the Haiku Foundation, (2) a turn in the river (2019), which was shortlisted for the Touchstone Award, and (3) a box of feathers (2022).

Notes:

1. This essay is based on a presentation co-led with Jeannie Martin at the Haiku Society of America's virtual national conference on June 13, 2021, entitled "Repetition in Haiku: A Presentation and Workshop." Many thanks to Jeannie for her insights, expertise, and examples.
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4. Vincent Tripi. *call it haiku*. Windsor, CT: bottle rockets press, 2018, p. 17.
5. Acorn 44.
6. *Modern Haiku* 33.1.
7. Francine Porad Award 2014.
8. The Haiku Calendar 2022, Snapshot Press.
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10. *Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku Master*. Translated by Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1998, p. 29.
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23. *#FemkuMag* 31.
24. *Ambrosia* 3.
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27. *The Heron's Nest* 24.1.
28. Acorn 20.
29. *The Heron's Nest* 18.1.

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38. Kristen Deming. *plum afternoon*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2017.
39. *Shamrock* 26.
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