

Haiku and the Aesthetics of Elegant Ethereality by Adam Graham

The pantheon of Japanese poetic aesthetics, cultivated across centuries of court culture, is rich with distinct shades and tones of beauty. This nuance demonstrates how central beauty is to Japanese culture. As Donald Keene writes, it is “difficult to discuss any aspect of Japanese culture without alluding to the Japanese sense of beauty, perhaps the central element in all of Japanese culture.”^[i] It is from this deep cultural investment in the various modalities of beauty that Japan's remarkable vocabulary of aesthetic principles arose.

Among the more familiar of these aesthetic principles are *sabi*, the invocation of a somber, “pleasant loneliness,”^[ii] and *wabi*, the modest “beauty of poverty.”^[iii] *Mono no aware* (pathos of things), the “aesthetic sense of the deep poignancy of things of this world,”^[iv] as well, *yūgen* the aesthetic of “mystery and depth,”^[v] a dark “negative beauty.”^[vi] And of course, *karumi*, the lightness of Bashō's late style, a “gentle-humoured”^[vii] aesthetic crafted with “light-hearted diction.”^[viii]

In addition to these more familiar aesthetic modes of beauty there are those less familiar, such as *yojō*, *fūryū*, *miyabi*, *iki*, *yūbi*, *okashi*, *en*, *hosomi*, and *yōen*. It is this final aesthetic ideal, *yōen*, that most intrigues, and a closer look is required to savor its nuance. *Yōen* is:

the romantic idealization of a delicate, dreamlike
beauty—the beauty of a peony
or of an exquisite heavenly maiden descending to earth
on a
hazy spring night.
Such beauty was elusive, ephemeral, the stuff that
dreams
are made of.^[ix]

Yōen's sense of delicate lightness conveys a "vision of a beauty not of this world,"^[x] and an "intricate tracery, a diaphanous veil."^[xi] This gossamer delicateness can be seen in a 1194 *waka* written by Fujiwara Teika one of Japan's greatest poets:

The bridge of dreams
 Floating on the brief spring night
 Soon breaks off:
 Now from the mountaintop a cloud
 Takes leave into the open sky.^[xii]

Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner argue the poem dissolves boundaries between dreaming and waking. Spring nights are brief and dawn arrives too quickly, dissolving the lover's dream. Yet this is no ordinary dream. The allusion to *The Tale of Genji* lifts it into something ethereal, a realm of idealized love beyond real experience. Waking into a luminous spring dawn, the speaker finds the dream lingers. A cloud trailing from a mountaintop becomes the lover's goodbye, and for one moment dreaming and waking dissolve. But the enchantment cannot last. When it fades, only the emptiness of sky remains.^[xiii] It is easy to see why this poem is traditionally regarded as the "epitome of the style of ethereal charm."^[xiv]

While *yōen* originated during classical times in Japan it is not exclusive to *waka*. The Buddhist poet-priest Shinkei (1406-1475) was vital in the development of *renga*, helping establish the form as high-art. In doing so he advocated for the inclusion of an "ethereal beauty" associated with *yōen* in *renga*.^[xv]

As *haikai no renga* emerged, and from it *haiku*, Japanese poetry opened to more common imagery and diction. However, *haikai* did not abandon *waka*'s elegant diction altogether, rather it was incorporated into *haikai*'s subversive works parodying traditional poetry.^[xvi] *Haikai* struck a "delicate balance between styles of classical elegance and common vulgarity,"^[xvii] juxtaposing

waka aesthetics, including *yōen*, with the mundanity of everyday life, creating the tension that is the hallmark of haikai. This balance is seen in Bashō's.

moonflowers so white
at night, alongside the outhouse
in the light of a torch^[xviii]

This haiku juxtaposes the tragic love of Prince Genji and Lady Moonflower in *The Tale of Genji* with the vulgarity of a toilet. The high refinement of language and image pivots into the common and low.^[xix]

Much of the focus in haikai became somewhat dominated by *sabi*, due to Bashō's cultivation and parody of this aesthetic. However, even Bashō's *karumi* was moving towards a lightness of touch, away from the loneliness of *sabi* and the "shadow of *yūgen*."^[xx] One wonders, had Bashō lived longer, developing *karumi* further, if it would have developed into *yōen*'s delicateness. Indeed, *yōen* was not foreign to haikai. The concern of cultivating *yōen* is seen in poetic treatises from the Early Modern period. The introduction to *Hitorigoto*, a foundational haikai treatise by the 17th-century poet Uejima Onitsura, states the "best work of famous haikai poets of both past and present has the qualities...of ethereal beauty (*yōen*) in imagery."^[xxi]

Intriguingly, *yōen* is language and syntax oriented, with the sensuousness of language itself emphasized. Laurel Rasplica Rodd notes that *yōen* uses "complex rhetorical techniques to develop its aura of magic or dream,"^[xxii] and Steven Carter notes its dreaminess was achieved through "complex syntactical patterns that drew attention to themselves."^[xxiii] This *language-forwardness* of *yōen* aligns well with contemporary English-language haiku's embracing of the "opaque materiality of language,"^[xxiv] a counter to the once popular notion of transparent diction where "words are invisible."^[xxv] This language-forward sensuality is seen in the

following by Bashō:

fragrant orchid –
 into a butterfly's wings
 it breathes the incense^[xxvi]

Even in translation, the exquisite daintiness of this scene, a butterfly's wings perfumed with the scent of orchid, emerges through its charmingly elegant diction.

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As a brief prefatory note for this section, while the following will explore the possibility of a *yōen*-like aesthetics at play within English-language haiku, the need to be exceptionally cautious in gesturing towards an equivalence between Western aesthetics and the aesthetics of traditional Japanese poetics is acknowledged.

The concept of *yōen* was introduced not to draw an equivalence, but rather to demonstrate the full breadth of aesthetic approaches used in Japanese poetry, including haikai, so as to launch an investigation into the use of similar aesthetic effects of luminosity, weightlessness, otherworldliness, ethereality, and magic that may operate within English-language haiku. For, certainly, Western poetics has its own pantheon of aesthetic values, for example the *sublime*, the *uncanny*, *mimesis*, *obfuscation*, *catharsis*, *harmony*, *ineffability*, *unity*, *dread*, *originality*, etc. Yet, despite this wide spectrum of aesthetic values, English-language haiku tends to remain within the narrow confines of a few poetic approaches, for example *transparency* and *immediacy*. This narrowing of values exiles certain aesthetics, common to other forms of Western literature, from English-language haiku, including those of transcendental elegance creating auras of magic and ethereal experience. This is a missed opportunity. Other Western literary forms employ this transcendental elegance to great effect: see Shakespeare, for example. In *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, Mercutio's Queen Mab speech conjures luminosity, weightlessness, magic before abruptly degenerating into brutal violence. This dramatic shift from ethereality to brutality reinforces the speech's thematics, underscoring Mercutio's contempt for Romeo's foolishness in trusting in dreams.

Another example is the poetry of Alexander Pope, especially his mock-epic the *Rape of the Lock*, a work over-saturated with delicate, ethereal, jewel-like aesthetics. Pope's ornamental language, like Mercutio's, functions to not only generate beautiful images, but to develop the poem's thematics, creating an ironic gap between epic grandeur and trivial subject, exposing an aristocratic society that treats social performance with an undue gravity. The language seduces the reader into its prettiness while revealing that prettiness as vapid.

These poetic values of luminosity, magic, dreaminess, and ethereality flow through the language and images of the Romantic poets, as seen in John Keats' *The Eve of St. Agnes*: "he arose / Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repos." Of note, evident in Keats is an element of eroticism converging with the ethereal dreaminess. This "erotic allure" was at times also an attribute of *yōen*.^[xxvii]

Beyond the Romantics, an aesthetics of elegant ethereality runs through the Aestheticism, Pre-Raphaelite, and Decadent movements, and persists well into the twentieth century. Wallace Stevens, W.B. Yeats, and Rainer Maria Rilke, much like Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, often juxtapose gossamer-like delicacy with thick, dense, and sometimes cruel passages achieving unsettling effects in their explorations of modernity. This lineage of elegant ethereality is deeply embedded in the Western literary tradition and, as will be demonstrated, represents an aesthetic with much to offer English-language haiku.

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The resonance of a haiku, whether melancholy, density, lightness, magic, etc. emerges from a writer's use of poetic

elements, for example diction, rhythm, imagery, figurative language. A single word or line can shade a haiku's entire aesthetic effect. To begin delineating the borders of an aesthetics of elegant ethereality in English-language haiku, consider the following,

moths under moonlight
the needle between
two songs

Max Breedlove^[xxviii]

The image here is mysterious, with a hint of somberness. The low hiss of a record player between tracks, darkness beyond the room, with just enough dim light to trace the trajectory of moths before they disappear once more into the night. A deep and successful work that crafts a *moody* scene lending itself to pensiveness.

However, if line one was altered to *wineglasses gleam in moonlight*, the mood shifts decisively away from its original pensiveness. Notwithstanding the quality and precarious length of the hypothetical line, with it, a hint of sensuality and an ethereal lightness of charm enters the poem. *Wineglasses* invoke delicateness and, in their plural form, a sense of romance, while *gleam* lends a dreamy, soft radiance. In this new scene, the silence between songs is no longer a space for moody contemplation but rather the soft laughing of lovers. As with everything in haiku, brevity is central to this aesthetic. A single well-chosen word, phrase, or image can steer the entire poem in one direction or another.

A second experiment of altering a line, this time in the opposite direction,

northern lighthouse
ribbons of light mist
on distant islands

Bruce H. Feingold^[xxix]

The phrase *ribbons of light* suggests qualities of delicate ethereality, and mist reinforces this lightness of touch. The line lends the haiku a soft, dreamy luminosity. However, if line two is altered to spruce pines sway, that aura of lightness is made heavy. The luminance shifts to a more shaded mysteriousness, introducing an undertone of existential melancholy.

Below is a haiku employing an aesthetic of elegant ethereality. The first is a complex work operating in two different registers,

night river –
trains ripple over
the floating city

Lorin Ford^[xxx]

Ford's dream-like scene may be a subtle nod to the floating world of *ukiyo* and its pleasures. The haiku opens with a shadowed image, with *night river* invoking darkness, mystery, even danger. Then, the base section counters this with bustling trains and the enchanting dazzlement of a *ripple over the floating city*. The juxtaposition of dark mystery and magical sparkle works well imaginatively and thematically.

Another example of a haiku combining two registers to wonderful effect is,

meadow walk—
the raven feather
from my dream

Brent Partridge^[xxxix]

Here the common diction and action of line one shades into line two's *raven*, with its ominous symbolism. Yet this darkness lifts and the symbolism lightens with the delicateness of *feather from my dream*. In the following, the shift from one register to another is reversed:

walking through the clouds
of sidewalk puddles –
most of life behind me now

Rebecca Lilly^[xxxix]

Walking through the clouds suggests airy lightness, and in conjunction with line two's playfulness, a sense of magical joy is invoked. Yet, this sense is tainted by line three's note of aging and the passage of time.

One last haiku demonstrates the subtle ability of diction to shift, playing with connotation to beautiful effect,

summer noon...
every leaf bears
the weight of light

Fatma Zohra Habis^[xxxix]

Here, a summer poem blazes. *Noon*, *bears*, and *weight* load the work with a heavy sluggishness. Yet, the faint shift offered by *light* in line three, rather than say *heat*, allows the poem to unburden itself from the summer oppressiveness, and transform, with the line *the weight of light*, into something gentle and delicate.

Other haiku, rather than juxtapose registers, stay within the same mood, creating an extended sensuous experience of ethereality:

sunrise
the trumpet edge
of a flower

Max Breedlove^[xxxiv]

Here, the sequence *edge of a flower* connotes a daintiness settling in comfortably with the opening sunrise. Another haiku remaining inside a single dreamy register is the following:

floating purple –
my daydreams follow
the water hyacinth

Deborah P Kolodji^[xxxv]

Here is the elegant presentation of a fanciful afternoon, the tranquility of the scene as light as air, for after all life is but the dream of a butterfly.

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The aesthetics of elegant ethereality generate a shimmering effect, leaving a luminous, delicate resonance, but for what purpose? How may this aesthetic achieve more than merely the production of a lovely image? Some previous examples touched briefly on the convergence of aesthetics and thematics. The following exploration delves a little deeper, offering possibilities for how such an aesthetic may help develop deep thematic expression and relevance for haiku in the contemporary world. The first haiku is an unpublished work presented in the Inkstone Poetry Forum, a workshopping space for haiku poets:

a silver moon rabbit
 catches the light –
 grandmother's thimble

Rebecca Drouilhet^[xxxvi]

This draft haiku remains within a single register producing wonderful effects. The objective image is simple: the glint of moonlight illuminating a thimble. Yet the writer's choices of how to present this image creates layers of playfulness and an aura of magic. The object is rendered with a twinkle of fantasy as it invokes the moon rabbit myths of various cultures. *Catches the light* gestures toward the thimble's materiality as it is illuminated, while also evoking the friskiness of the mythic rabbit itself fast as light.

At certain moments in literary history, such enchanting diction would have been expected, but in today's brash and crude language environment the elegant charm of this haiku compels itself into a reader's consciousness. In a recent essay, Brad Bennett discusses diction choice in haiku, noting at times there is one word more compelling and impactful than any other. Bennett dubbed these *hot words*.^[xxxvii] Within the noise of contemporary language, Drouilhet's haiku, as a whole, acts as a kind of *hot haiku*. In a world of mercenary, commodified images, it captivates through the creation of a delicately enchanted image. In an age of cheap, disposable goods, the grace bestowed upon this thimble becomes a revolutionary act against banal consumerism and its relentless transformation of objects, sensations, memories, and relationships into products. The spell cast upon it is a protective magic, blunting the malevolent forces of marketization.

A second exploration is a haiku shifting between registers. It too demonstrates a contemporaneity by crafting an image enchanting yet commenting upon today's world:

closing up
the worker empties a pail
of moonlight

Zach Czuprynski^[xxxviii]

The image is a common one: a worker finishing the last menial task of the night, carrying a bucket of dirty mop water out back to empty it. Yet the sequence *a pail of moonlight* charms the scene, magically transforming dirty suds into silver-blue moonlight. This dreaminess juxtaposed with the mundane diction of *closing up* and the bluntness of the worker, creates a tension that delivers a biting critique of late-stage capitalism. Trapped in a system of extreme inequality and immense corporate power, *the worker* is coerced into emptying out the magic and wonder of existence itself.

These final two haiku represent only two possibilities among many, a pair of avenues into the potential of such aesthetics in contemporary English-language haiku. It is through an aesthetics of elegant ethereality that they produce more than pretty pictures, more than mere ornamentation. The very delicateness of diction is a form of resistance rendering haiku that revolt, that prick consciousness, that hold a mirror to the degrading forces of the status quo. In doing so they generate relevance in today's world while dwelling in the spirit of haikai at its inception, a spirit of courage to challenge the status quo and confront the forces of power and authority.

Notes

[i] Donald Keene. *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 3.

[ii] Laurel Rasplica Rodd, trans., *Shinkokinshū: New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), xxii.

[iii] R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku, Volume Two: From Issa up to the Present* (Greenpoint Books, 2022), viii.

- [iv] Kōji Kawamoto, *The Poetics of Japanese Verse: Imagery, Structure, and Meter*, trans. Stephen Collington, Kevin Collins, and Gustav Heldt (University of Tokyo Press, 2000), 63.
- [v] Earl Roy Miner, *Japanese Linked Poetry: An Account with Translations of Renga and Haikai Sequences* (Princeton University Press, 1980), 143.
- [vi] Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki* (Twayne Publishers, 1982), 42.
- [vii] Bob Jones, "Haiku Nature," The Haiku Foundation Digital Library, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/2361>.
- [viii] Susumu Takiguchi, "Karumi: Matsuo Basho's Ultimate Poetical Value, Or Was It?" *Juxtapositions: A Journal of Haiku Research and Scholarship* 1.1 (2015).
- [ix] Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner. *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 1961) 262.
- [x] *Ibid.*
- [xi] Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, *Heart's Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 51.
- [xii] Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, 262.
- [xiii] *Ibid.*, 263.
- [xiv] *Ibid.*
- [xv] Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 1968), 140.
- [xvi] Kawamoto, *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*, 63.
- [xvii] *Ibid.*, 66.
- [xviii] Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, 75.
- [xix] *Ibid.*, (Yamamoto).
- [xx] Lorenzo Marinucci, "A Translation of Kuki Shūzō's 'A Reflection on Poetic Spirit' (*Fūryū ni kansuru ikkōsatsu*, 1937/1941)," *Japan Studies Review* 23 (2019): 95–124.
- [xxi] Cheryl Crowley, "Putting Makoto into Practice: Onitsura's *Hit-origoto*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 13.
- [xxii] Rodd, trans., *Shinkokinshū*, xxiii.

- [xxiii] Steven D. Carter, trans., *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 193.
- [xxiv] Cor van den Heuvel and Philip Rowland, "A Dialogue on the Experimental," *Frogpond* 25: 3 (2002): 50–51.
- [xxv] Cor Van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English*, 3rd ed. (Norton, 1999), xxix.
- [xxvi] Ueda, Basho and His Interpreters, 110.
- [xxvii] Paul S. Atkins, *Teika: The Life and Works of a Medieval Japanese Poet* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 94.
- [xxviii] *Modern Haiku* 56.3 (Autumn 2025): 14.
- [xxix] *Ibid*, 26.
- [xxx] Lorin Ford, *A Wattle Seedpod* (Post Pressed, 2008), 29.
- [xxxi] *The Heron's Nest* 28: 1 (March 2026).
- [xxxii] *Modern Haiku* 56.3 (Autumn 2025).
- [xxxiii] *Frogpond* 48:3 (Autumn 2025).
- [xxxiv] *The Heron's Nest* 28: 1 (March 2026).
- [xxxv] *Frogpond* 49:1 (Winter 2026).
- [xxxvi] Rebecca Drouilhet, Inkstone Poetry Forum, <https://www.inkstonepoetry.com/>. Presented April 2026. Used with permission.
- [xxxvii] Brad Bennett, "Hot Words in Haiku," *Modern Haiku* 57.1 (Winter–Spring 2026): 27–38.
- [xxxviii] *Modern Haiku* 57.1 (Winter-Spring 2026).