

Chapter 5

Haiku and Art of Selection

Autumn is a second spring where every leaf is a flower
(Miller 126).

Albert Camus

The strength of haiku is its ability to paint a scene which amplifies a moment while delivering an insight into seasonal variations as well as the writer's own attitude toward the season specific images inserted in the poem—all within the length approximately equivalent to a human breath unit. With such unique characteristics, learning to create haiku poems thus offers beginning writers best practice for improving observation skills and developing concise expression.

This chapter presents a set of guidelines for writing haiku, starting with formal pattern of traditional haiku and its English counterpart which has more flexible syllable counts, then the conventions of its rhythm, and lastly, its content.

5.1 Formal Pattern of Traditional Haiku

Haiku, as mentioned earlier, is a short poem able to fit in one human breath. Usually in three lines, it is composed in a 5-7-5 syllabic structure as below.

PATTERN OF TRADITIONAL HAIKU

Line 1	5 syllables
Line 2	7 syllables
Line 3	5 syllables

The line-lengths of five and seven syllables, within a total of 17 syllables, are divided in groups of five, seven and five; that is, five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third.

Example 5.1.1

fu-ru-i-ke ya	5 syllables
ka-wa-zu to-bi-ko-mu	7 syllables
mi-zu no o-to	5 syllables

(France 239)

The example above written by a haiku master Matsuo Basho follows the traditional haiku constraints of 5-7-5 syllabic format. When writing haiku in English, some writers chose to follow this strict form. James Kirkup a prolific writer, for one, made a successful adoption of Japanese haiku by employing the above traditional poetic form of 17 syllables disposed in three lines.

Study a haiku example of Kirkup below.

Example 5.1.2

In the amber dusk	5 syllables
Each island dreams its own night—	7 syllables
The sea swarms with gold.	5 syllables

(Sarker 16)

However, English and Japanese languages do not share the same grammar and word construction. Sometimes, using 17 syllables especially by unpracticed hands can result in an overload of information, as in Example 5.1.3 below.

Example 5.1.3

There is an old pond;	5 syllables
From the shore, a frog leaps in;	7 syllables
The sound of water	5 syllables

In Example 5.1.3, the writer forces two pauses into the poem, one at the end of the first line and the other, at the end of the second. Be aware that as the words within a line are tediously expanded to fit in the syllabic format, the poetic reflection here is trite, and the sound of the poem exhausted.

Compare Example 5.1.3 with a slightly different version below, written by an English writer Reginald Blyth, and perhaps one of the best known English versions of Basho's famous frog haiku (see: romanised Japanese version of this poem in Example 5.1.1).

Example 5.1.4

The old pond;	3 syllables
A frog jumps in—	4 syllables
The sound of the water.	6 syllables

(Blyth 253)

Notice here that though in fewer syllables, the translated haiku carries the same amount of information as originally written by Basho—an old pond (from a compound noun *furuike*, consisting of *furu* for "old" and *ike*, "pond"); a cutting-word *ya* which marks a transition between the image previously mentioned (the pond) and the image coming up next—which is a frog jumping in water; and lastly, the frog-jump-in water sound (*kawasu*=frog; *tobikomu*=jump; *mizu*=water; *no-oto*=sound). Clearly, owing to the differences between Japanese and English languages, English haiku may not adhere to the 17-syllable count or 7-5-7 pattern.

Now, study another translated version of Basho's frog haiku.

Example 5.1.5

pond	1 syllable
frog	1 syllable
plop!	1 syllable

(Pope 358)

English haiku above was again composed by James Kirkup, this time with much fewer syllables. This three-lined poem may not sound like haiku, with only word (also, one syllable) in each line, but Kirkup puts here the word “Plop” at the right position. He creates the sense of immediacy by putting this word which is onomatopoeic, as is *oto* in the original version, and which also explains the relations between two previous words, pond and frog. With this extreme form, Kirkup very well keeps striking features of Japanese haiku, both brevity and simplicity.

However, while many writers keep the translations of Japanese haiku as minimal as possible as in the examples, or even create English haiku themselves, beginning writers of Haiku who just started learning to limit their verbal elaboration are advised to take traditional haiku pattern, following strictly the 5-7-5 rule.

5.2 Rhythm

Although rhymed haiku is possible among the works of contemporary writers, traditional haiku has no rhyming scheme, nor fixed metrical pattern. Now, read the following examples (Example 5.2.1 and Example 5.2.2).

Example 5.2.1

at a canal *walk*—
droplets of dew mingle in
long cicadas' *talk*

Example 5.2.2

at a canal walk—
droplets of dew mingle in
cicadas' *laughter*

In Example 5.2.1, line 1 and line 2 both consist of five syllables each and the last word of the first line (*walk*) rhyme with that of the third line (*talk*). In Example 5.2.2, the last word of the third line is changed to laughter, which prevents it from rhyming with the previous line endings (*walk* and *in*). With the unrhymed lines, Example 5.2.2

clearly denotes haiku's emphasis on brevity and simplicity whereas in Example 5.2.1, the rhymed lines are noticeable and so capable of distracting the readers from focusing on the haiku moment.

Note that unlike Western tradition which uses the rhyming patterns—such as the metrical patterns in sonnet or rhyming schemes in nursery rhyme, haiku poems, more like a musical piece, enjoys not only the sounds of the notes, but also the silence and the pauses between them.

Reread Example 5.2.2 and feel the “silence” in the poem.

According to the example, notice that at the end of the first line, an em dash (—) is used to indicate a break between the first chunk of words describing the scene (at a canal walk), and the second chunk (text in italics).

Example 5.2.3

at a canal walk—
droplets of dew mingle in
cicadas' laughter

Usually English haiku marks the pause with *an em dash* or *a colon*, placed at the end of first or second line. Note also that it is not uncommon for a haiku poem to be present with an ellipsis, or with no punctuation to mark the break, as in a work of an American poet James Hackett below.

Example 5.2.4

deep within the stream
the huge fish lie motionless
facing the current
(Gurga 68)

In the example presented above, Hackett inserts here no punctuation between the lines, yet the break is there, at the juxtaposition of images presented in the scene being described.

5.3 Seasonal Reference

Season word, or in Japanese **Kigo**, is an essential element of haiku and can be either a word or a phrase associated with a particular season. When placed in the poem, the word *cherry-blossom*, for example, can be a reference to spring while the word *orange* or *lemon* may be strongly associated with summer.

Below is another example from Basho which fills the moment in the scene with two images (*the misty mountain path* and *a big rising sun*) and one smell detail (*the scent of plum blossoms*).

Example 5.3.1

the scent of plum blossoms
on the misty mountain path
a big rising sun
(Alex & Ramsay 6)

Some haiku like those written by master Basho are composed of two images, separated by a cutting. Be aware that for an effective haiku the images selected are not those often been paired together. For example, pairing an image of *a big rising sun* with *the sky at dawn* will not give a juxtaposition of images that can deliver poignant sensory nor insights to the readers as with the image of *the misty mountain path*. By simply using such juxtaposition, haiku introduces to the readers new angle or point-of-view on natural elements—which are seen every day but nobody pays any attention to, and thus brings them into a philosophical dimension, an insight into impermanence of all existences.

Example 5.3.2

waterfall roaring—
though the sparrow sings unheard
still he keeps singing
(Balabanova 36)

In the haiku above originally composed by Kirkup, the sparrow is a kigo which symbolizes mid-spring. Notice here that he adds also a “cutting” which divides his haiku into two parts: the images of waterfall and the sparrow. Keep in mind also that Kirkup describes the moment in present tense and makes no attempt to use simile or metaphor, or interpret his attitude toward the spring in the content, nor does he obviously mention or name the season.

Clearly, another essential element of haiku is its ability to deliver to the readers **the sense of immediacy**, to portray the moment within 17-syllable length while inserting the writer’s attitude into the moment of the description. The use of present tense in English haiku is therefore desirable, along with the use of kigo—the haiku economy of words to mention one word while evoking all the associations of the season.

EXERCISE

Prompt 15: Painting a Sketch of Life

Instruction: Follow the five steps below to begin your first haiku, with a summer kigo.

Limitation: Strictly follow the 5-7-5 rule.

Step 1: Pick a summer kigo for your poem. As the choice of kigo will vary enormously according to cultural background, pick one that associates with background of the Thais.

Step 2: The kigo will be your first image. Put it in the first line and then add words to it so you will have five syllables.

Step 3: Think of an emotion that comes up while experiencing the kigo.

Step 4: Think of another nature image that represents the emotion.

Step 5: Combine step 3 and step 4 by putting the second image in the next two lines, using 7 and 5 syllables respectively.

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

SAMPLE

Step 1: Pick a summer kigo for your poem. As the choice of kigo will vary enormously according to cultural background, pick one that associates with background of the Thais.

blossom

Step 2: The kigo will be your first image. Put it in the first line and then add words to it so you will have five syllables.

light blossoming waves

Step 3: Think of an emotion that comes up while experiencing the kigo.

anxious longing to meet someone

Step 4: Think of another nature image that represents the emotion.

frog

Step 5: Combine step 3 and step 4 by putting the second image in the next two lines, using 7 and 5 syllables respectively.

night frog croaks and settles in
fallen pink petals

Sample

light blossoming waves—
night frog croaks and settles in
fallen pink petals

Chapter 6

EXERCISE 1

Instruction: In the space provided below, write a paragraph of at least 300 words in response to the prompt given.

Prompt Write an autobiography telling what life means to you, your strength, hope, and where you are in life.
