

Haiku

"The primary purpose of reading and writing haiku is sharing moments of our lives that have moved us, pieces of experience and perception that we offer or receive as gifts. At the deepest level, this is one of the great purposes of all art, and especially of literature."
--William J. Higginson

Haiku is a contemplative, unrhymed Japanese poem that attempts to chronicle the essence of a moment in which nature is linked to human life. It is one of the most important forms of traditional Japanese poetry. A well-written haiku creates tension between contrasting elements such as movement and inactivity, change and continuance, time and timelessness, nature and humanity. Most haiku poems contain themes that are simple to understand but give the reader new insight into a well-known experience or situation.

The modern form of haiku dates from the 1890s, and is developed from earlier forms of poetry, hokku and haikai. The great Japanese master of haiku was Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). His poems are often now read as haiku, but are more properly referred to as hokku. The name Basho means "banana tree" and was adopted by the poet when he moved into a hut located next to a banana tree. His last haiku was: "Falling ill on a journey, my dreams run round a withered field."

Three general guidelines govern haiku writing in Japanese:

1. The poem consists of 17 syllables, contained usually within three lines; this convention is a must in Japanese. In English, this can sometimes be difficult due to variations in the lengths of syllables, so variations are accepted.
2. The poem should indicate through a kigo, a season word, the time of year. Often, the kigo is not obvious.
3. The poem contains a "cutting" or division between two contrasting parts. In English, the first or second line usually ends with a colon or long dash to indicate this cutting.

Additionally, haiku avoids first person accounts and disallows the use of similes or metaphors. While some haiku poets try to experience the feelings of natural objects, it is not usually their intent to give human attributes to inanimate objects, nor to personalize nature.

In writing haiku, contemplate nature and the present moment. Use verbs in the present tense, and choose each word very carefully.

This is the form in which English-written haiku poems are most commonly composed (remember, these are just guidelines):

Line 1 = 5 syllables - when - short line

Line 2 = 7 syllables - where - long line

Line 3 = 5 syllables - what - short line

Examples

An old pond;
A frog jumps in--
The sound of water.
--Matsuo Basho

Springtime in the woods
A little white snake went in
The pond fast.
--Mandy Powell, age 7

References

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[The Art of Haiku Poetry](#)

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