



Hello and welcome back to "Not Exactly Shakespeare." Today we dive in and take a look at our first form of poetry: the haiku. To begin our consideration of the haiku, I

have to introduce you to a term

that sounds absolutely ghastly: Syllabic

Versification. I know, when you look at that you

want to run screaming. Actually it is a high falutin term for a very simple idea. The word "syllabic" refers to the term syllable. The syllables of a word are the number of sounds that make up that word. For instance, the word "diplodocus" has four syllables in it or four separate sounds: Dip-lo-do-cus. Likewise, the syllables of a line of poetry are the number of sounds that make up that line. If I were to write: "There once was a man from Nantucket" -- this would be a line with nine syllables in it. Versification is defined as "the art of writing a poem or verse." So, syllabic versification is the art of writing a poem with a certain number of syllables in each line. See? Not so bad after all.

In order to see some cracking good poetry written like this, we must first journey to the Far East -- to the land of silken kimonos, samurai warriors, sumo wrestling and sushi. We go to Japan....

First autumn morning:
the mirror I stare into
shows my father's face.

--Haiku by Kijo Murakami, found on toyomasu.com

This beautiful haiku by Kijo Murakami is a good place to begin. You may have noticed already that haiku poetry is very short -- only three lines long. It is unrhymed, so you don't have to worry about that. You just need to get the right number of syllables or sounds in each line:

Line One: 5 syllables

Line Two: 7 syllables

Line Three: 5 syllables

Armed with this knowledge at age eleven, I left school one day and made some up in my head as I walked home.

As I strolled down the hill and turned right onto Main Street, I tried to come up with something beautiful...

Love

Like a tender touch
or a soft caress to show
caring in one's heart.

Passing Miller's Stationary Shop, I was mightily impressed with this -- in particular with my use of the word "caress"

which I had never had occasion to use before and thought sounded very grown-up.

The traffic buzzed noisily past me at the corner of Main and Market Streets and my longing for silence and solitude prompted this...

Nature

Animals and trees
lie peacefully in the wood --
not to be disturbed.

I liked this one because it easily fit the 5-7-5 syllable rule and had an eco-friendly message at a time when anything eco-friendly was quite new and “hip”.

In front of the Post Office, I spotted my arch-enemy from school -- you know the type: the girl who makes fun of your shoes, your clothes, your hair, etcetera, etcetera, right down to the way you breathe. Determined to be philosophical and wise about the fact that she was a total cow, I came up with this...

School

A place for learning,
a place for good times and bad,
a place to mature.

...because of course, her daily tormenting was only going to make me a stronger, more mature person and help, as my mum put it, to build character. Yeah, right. Growing decidedly

uncomfortable with the fact that my character had not improved a bit (no matter how much I put up with) I turned my thoughts to more attractive prospects:

Television

Our eyes to the world,
it fulfils our fantasies
and brings enjoyment.

With this, I turned at the corner of 3rd and Jefferson and was home.

See how easy it is? Now these early examples of my haiku writing are fine. But they do not take many things into account. I've been doing some research on haiku and have found out just how complex and beautiful they can be. So let me give you the information that I did not have while walking home from school that day, and I'll bet your haiku will be a lot better than mine.

Tip 1. What to write about

The subject of many haiku poems is the natural world -- birds, trees, flowers, insects, that sort of thing. But don't think you have to go out and find something stunningly beautiful in the garden to



write about. Haiku is not that picky. This form of poetry writes about things as they are whether they are pretty, ugly, old, young, dirty, clean, scarred or broken. It is not the poetry of movie stars and limousines, but of the ordinary and every day. The real genius of haiku is to recognise the significance of common things, even if these things are not very attractive. One of the first and greatest masters of the haiku form, a man named Basho, wrote:

On the dead limb
squats a crow --
autumn night.

--*Lucien Stryk, trans., On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho (London: Penguin Books, 1985) 35.*

Now bear in mind that this has been translated from Japanese (rather nicely by Lucien Stryk) and so it no longer conforms to the 5-7-5 syllable rule. That, as they say, has been lost in translation. But right now, it is the subject that matters. Here are the images used in the poem:

1. A dead tree limb which is probably brittle and black,
2. A crow -- a bird that eats carrion and rubbish and is also black,
3. The word "squats" which is hardly a dainty pose, and
4. The autumn night -- cold, dark and barren.

This is not a pretty poem with a beautiful or noble subject. It is an everyday sight, something that Basho saw from his hut or passed on the road. And he captures it perfectly. Reading it you get a real feeling of the cold, barrenness of autumn, of early nightfall and silent trees. You can imagine that you are standing there looking at the crow yourself.

The point is that your haiku can be about anything you want -- the most delicate blue forget-me-not reposed in the sun-dappled shade of an apple tree, or a dung-beetle rolling before it a snowball-shaped sphere of poo. But you must represent it as it is, which brings me to another point...

Tip 2. Keep it short

Above, I talked about a “delicate blue forget-me-not reposed in the sun-dappled shade ... yadda, yadda, yadda.” If you take only one thing from this series let it be this: that sort of flowery language can kill a haiku, or indeed anything other type of poem.

Exaggerated and ornate language is known as hyperbole, and it is an effective way to kill any real emotion in your poem. It'll sound fake because it is fake; no one talks like that in real life. Furthermore, there is just no room for it in a haiku. You only have three short lines to work with – a grand total of 17 syllables. Padding your ideas with extra descriptions and clever adjectives is therefore like trying to cram ten people into the back of a Mini – it just doesn't work.

That is why one of the basic rules of haiku is compression: keeping it simple and brief. There is real beauty in this simplicity – a quiet, unpretentious beauty that makes you feel quiet when you read it. Some days, if I am really stressed about something, I will pick a book of Basho's poetry because I find it quite soothing. I stop worrying about the outside world for a moment and instead look with him at crows and chestnuts and cherry blossoms. And I feel better.

So how can you achieve this compression in your own poetry? By leaving these things OUT of it:

Your Ego. Many poets like to impress people by showing off in their verses. They indulge in witty and clever descriptions and hyperbole. But remember: you are writing about something as it is, NOT as you want it to be. Take yourself completely out of the poem and write it as if a disembodied pair of eyes is seeing the object without making any comment or judgment on it. Allow the object of your haiku to exist without your help. Basho writes:

Another haiku?
Yet more cherry blossoms --
not my face.

--Stryk 31.

He recognised that the haiku is not in any way a reflection of himself or how cleverly he can use words. It is a captured

moment, observed. It does not need to be added to because it is significant in and of itself.

Explanations. My biggest problem when writing poetry is that I always want to make sure that everyone gets my point. I want to explain it to them. That is fatal. There is an age old rule in creative writing: “Show, don’t tell.” It is the most important rule that I can teach you. For instance, here is a haiku that tells the reader the point:

The yard is empty,
But like a bird that has flown
A child once played here.

It’s a bit bland, isn’t it? It seems to have an oddly heavy feel to it compared to the lightness of Basho’s verses. Now compare it to the poem I wrote when I finally stopped trying to drive the message home with a sledgehammer:

Blank span of green grass.
The shadow follows the bird --
There, a child once played.

Of the two, this one is much better. In it I mention a stretch of green grass. A bird flies overhead trailing its shadow along behind it. This is the first part of the haiku. The second

mentions the fact that a child once played on that lawn. The poem doesn't explain the connection between the first and second parts, but the connection exists. The bird represents a child that is grown and gone (essentially, left the nest). The shadow, then, is the memory of the child. That is the trick to understanding haiku. As the reader you must bridge the gap between the parts of the poem that seem separate. It is on that bridge you find the deepest meaning. As the poet, you have the tougher job: you must trust your readers to get the point.

All 17 Syllables. WHAT? Yes, once you get used to writing haiku, you don't even have to stick to the 5-7-5 rule. Remember, we are trying to keep this short, simple and uncluttered. If you write a line that is complete and beautiful and is only 4 syllables long, then adding another word will just make it clunky. Go back to the translated poem by Basho:

Another haiku?
Yet more cherry blossoms --
not my face.

--Stryk 31.

Far from adhering to the 5-7-5 rule, the syllable count of this verse is 5-6-3. And yet it is complete. Would the poem be improved if we added words to it to make it fit the formula?

Another haiku?

Describe more cherry blossoms --
but not my own face.

Ironically, the poem has lost something by adding something to it. It was simple and beautiful and it became cumbersome and bland under the weight of its extra syllables. So, quite simply, don't do it. Don't pad your work with unnecessary words.

But, you may ask, if my poem is not 5-7-5 is it still a haiku? Yes. It is simply a "free-form" haiku, instead of a "strict-form" haiku. Apparently there is an old Japanese saying: "Learn the rules and then throw the rule book away." In other words, once you have practiced writing strict form haiku, feel free to reduce the number of syllables in order to make your poems more compact.

Tip 3. Write in the present tense

Avoid too many trips down memory lane. Haiku poetry captures a moment and hence is usually written in the present tense. It is a bit like taking a poetic photograph of something -- preserving it as it is right now. For instance, when Basho writes

A dragonfly, trying to --
oops, hang on to the upside
of a blade of grass.

--Basho's haiku taken from www.haiku.INSOUTHSEA.CO.UK, translator unknown.

he captures the moment as it happens and as a result you can see the dragonfly lose its grip on the blade of grass. When a memory does make its way into a haiku, it is still remembered now, as part of the present moment.

And that, as they say, is all she wrote. If you follow these guidelines, you will be writing some fantastic haiku in no time at all. Now get writing and if you like, you can submit your work and I'll feature it on the "Voices" page of this website. For inspiration, I'll leave you with a parting word from the master...

How I long to see
among dawn flowers,
the face of God.

--Stryk 70.

