



The History and Artistry of Haiku

Patricia Burlison

Haiku is a well-known form of Japanese poetry in the West. Students like writing haiku because of its brevity; teachers find it an interesting addition to the study of poetry. With some basic background information and some hints for guided practice, the study of haiku can give students a brief glimpse into Japanese culture.

Background

Historically, there are only a few poets in Japan who, over the centuries, have become respected for their haiku poetry. Among these are Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki. Of these four, the most famous is Bashō. He is credited with making haiku a revered form of poetry. Before Bashō refined the haiku poem, its form of 17 syllables had been used, but not with the simplicity and depth of meaning that Bashō brought to the form.

Bashō was born in 1644 in the city of Ueno. His father was a samurai of lower rank in the service of the Tōdō family. When Bashō was nine years old, he became a study companion to the Tōdō family heir, Yoshitada. These two became great friends and studied the art of linked verse under a famous writer of the time, Teitoku. Yoshitada died at the age of 25, leaving Bashō crushed with grief. Bashō asked to be released from service to the Tōdō family, but his request was denied, so he ran away to Kyoto. It is believed that he spent several years there in a temple studying the Chinese and Japanese classics.

In 1671, Bashō returned to his home in Ueno and presented to the shrine there an anthology of works by many authors, including himself, which he edited and critiqued. The anthology was well-received and Bashō gained respect for the work. Soon thereafter, he left for Edo (now Tokyo) which was the center of the Tokugawa government. There he worked at various jobs as he made a name for himself in the circle of poets. He was invited to study with Sōen, a famous contemporary poet. It was Sōen's influence that taught Bashō the value of the humble and unpretentious use of images from everyday life that would become the hallmark of his poetry.

In 1676, Bashō began to compose poetry for publication. The poems he wrote appeared in many anthologies over the next four years, and he found himself with disciples whose poems were also being published. However, he was not satisfied with this type of writing and eventually moved to a small house by a river. Living by himself, he began to withdraw from the world around him. Signs of spiritual suffering can be seen in his poems from this period.

It was during this time of suffering that Bashō began studying Zen meditation under the guidance of a priest. He is known to have said that he had one foot in the other world and one in this world, leading us to believe that meditation probably never led him to enlightenment. In 1682, Bashō's home was destroyed by fire. His writings of the following two years reveal his resulting distress as he struggled to find his own style of expression.

In the summer of 1684, Bashō started on the first of his five famous travels around Japan. It was a precarious time to travel, and most people would not simply take to the open road. His records of his travels have become classical literature. They are written in a combination of prose and poetry called *haibun*. His writing took on a mature, knowing style, representing the spiritual distance he had traveled. Anthologies of his works were published during this period, including *Spring Days*, a collection of his own and his pupils' poems containing Bashō's most famous haiku:

Furuike ya, kawazu tobikomu, mizu no oto.

Breaking the silence
Of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water-
A deep resonance.

This poem is representative of Bashō's mature style. On the surface it is a description of the actions of a frog. However, considered more deeply, it is also a mirror that reflects the author. Bashō writes: "Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one--when you have plunged

deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural-if the object and yourself are separate-then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit" (Bashō, 33).

Bashō continued to travel and write, but in 1692 he settled into a house where he spent the next two and a half years in isolation. The poems of these years again reflect his detachment from life. In 1694, he left on the last of his major travels. The poems from this last journey suggest a foreboding. Bashō's health was poor, and he began to compose his death bed poems, dictating them to one of his disciples. Bashō died on October 12, 1694. His works have remained timeless, and are today revered as those of a master poet, "...little drops of the essence of poetry" (Sansom, 492).

Hints for Writing Haiku with Students

In Japanese, a haiku poem is usually divided into three groups/lines of syllables, the first and last with five syllables, the second with seven. However, be careful not to get stymied by strict adherence to the number of syllables and miss the essence of haiku. The 17 syllables is not an absolute rule. Most Japanese syllables are short, as in po-ta-to. English syllables can be long, and take up too much space in a haiku, so English haiku frequently have fewer than 17 syllables, sometimes as few as ten.

Haiku presents simple imagery, devoid of similes, metaphors, and eloquent adjectives and adverbs. When crafting haiku, think of a group of words that present an observation in a way that appeals to the senses. Use sight, touch, sound, smell, taste, or sensations like pain or movement. Tell of a specific event or observation; do not write in general terms. Write in the present tense. Try to indicate the feelings of the poet as she/he is writing the poem. When describing an event, present it as an image. For example, the following is **NOT** haiku:

I watched the rain
Drops as they splattered
Into the puddle.

As written by a 4th grade student, the same sentiment is expressed as haiku:

Soft warm splatterings
Echoing in circles
Settle in the puddle.

One way to teach students to make specific observations is to go outside and look at one small object or event in nature. Watch a cricket move, describe a leaf, observe the clouds. Have students record what they see, then work it into haiku. (If outdoor observation isn't possible, use prints of art works, Japanese pieces if possible, and do the same kind of focusing on small details and single events.) Japanese has a set of words, *kigo*, that refer to specific seasons and are fundamental to haiku. English has no agreed upon set, but do try to use words that refer to a season, or lead the reader to sense a season.

By teaching students some of the history of haiku, we validate the art form and give it importance. Through our efforts to teach the skills of expressing simple imagery, we give students a glimpse into the simplicity and beauty of the Japanese aesthetic.

Bibliography

Bashō. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. New York: Penguin Books, reprinted 1966.

Blyth, R.H. *Haiku*. Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1962.

Sansom, G.B. *Japan: A Short Cultural History*. California: Stanford University Press, 1952.

Patricia Burlison is an elementary classroom teacher on Lopez Island in Washington State. She has traveled to Japan several times, writes curriculum, and facilitates teacher in-service programs.

The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies is made possible through the generous support of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.