

## What are Haiku?

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The term *haiku* is a fairly late addition to Japanese poetry. The poet Shiki coined the term in the nineteenth-century from a longer, more traditional phrase, *haikai renga no hokku* ("the introductory lines of light linked verse"). To understand the *haiku*'s history as a *genre*, peruse the vocabulary entries for its predecessors, the *hokku* and the *haikai renga* or *renku*, on the class website.

The *haiku* genre follows several conventions:

(1) The traditional Japanese *haiku* consists of three lines. The first line contains five syllables, the second line contains seven, and the last line five. In Japanese, the language further restricts the syllables in that each syllable must have no more than three sound units (sound-components formed of a consonant, a vowel, and another consonant). The three-unit rule is usually ignored in English *haiku*, since English syllables vary in size much more than in Japanese. Furthermore, in English translation, this 5/7/5 syllable count is occasionally modified to three lines containing 6/7/6 syllables respectively, since English is not as "compact" as Japanese.

(2) The traditional subject matter of a *haiku* is a Zen description of natural phenomena, wildlife, common everyday occurrences, or particular locations. Insects and seasonal activities are particularly popular topics. If the subject matter is something besides a scene from nature, the poem is technically a *senryu* rather than a *haiku*. The point was that the imagery presents a "Zen snapshot" of the universe, setting aside logic and thought for a flash of intuitive insight. The *haiku* seeks to capture the qualities of experiencing the natural world uncluttered by "ideas." Often editors will talk about "the *haiku* moment"--that split second when we first experience something but before we begin to think about it. (In many ways, this is comparable to the lyric moment in the English tradition of poetry.)

(3) The *haiku* is always set during a particular season or month as indicated by a *kigo*, or traditional season-word. This brief (and often subtle) reference to a season or an object or activity associated with that time of year establishes the predominant mood of the poem. These words place the *haiku* within a specific month or season, establishing an atmosphere for the poem while maintaining brevity. Japanese books of poetry are usually divided according to season, with the five Japanese seasons being Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, and New Year's added as the fifth season to Europe's traditional four. The *kigo* can be an actual reference to the name of the season or a month, or it can be a traditional connotative word: cicadas, fireflies, flies, frogs, and mosquitoes are common *kigo* for summer *haiku*, for instance. Likewise, billowing clouds, summer storms, burning sunshine, fans, midday naps, parasols, and planters' songs are other *kigo* for summer. Fall *kigo* include references to the moon, falling leaves, scarecrows, the call of crickets, chrysanthemums, and allusions to the cold weather, lengthening nights, graveside visits, charcoal kilns, medicinal roots, gourds, persimmons, apples, and vines. Winter *kigo* include imagery of snow, bowl-beating rituals or begging, allusions to failing strength, charcoal fires, banked fires, socks drying, the old calendar, and *mochi*--the makers of festive rice-cakes. Spring *kigo* include cherry blossoms, flowers, and so on.

(4) It is striking a feature of the *haiku* that direct discussion of the poem's implications or "deeper meanings" is forbidden in the body of the poem. Likewise, symbolism or puns are discouraged in a manner alien to Western poetry. The poet describes her subject in an unusual manner without making explicit commentary or explicit moral judgment. The genre often relies upon allusions to earlier *haiku* or implies a comparison between the natural setting and something else. Simplicity is more valued than "cleverness." If the poet is being clever, using puns or symbols, or being too philosophical, the poem again is technically a *senryu* rather than a *haiku*.

(5) *Haiku* poets often present the material under pseudonyms rather than using their true names.

(6) Additionally, the *haiku* traditionally employ "the technique of cutting"--i.e., a division in thought between the earlier and later portions of the poem. These two divisions must be able to stand independently from each other, but each one must also enrich the reader's understanding of the other section. In English translation, this division is often (but not always) indicated through punctuation marks such as a dash, colon, semicolon, or ellipsis.

Many Japanese poets have written *haiku*; the two acknowledged masters being Bashó (a pen-name for Matsuo Munefusa) and Kobayashi Issa (a pen-name for Kobayashi Nobuyuki). *Haiku* have profoundly influenced the Imagist movement in 20th century English literature. The list of poets who attempted the *haiku* or admired the genre includes Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Conrad Aiken, and W. B. Yeats.