

# TRANSPLANTING THE

# Haiku

By Donna Eisenstat

**A**lthough the haiku first flowered in Japan and retains its distinctively Japanese character, it has proved so adaptable that it flourishes in many parts of the world. With only three lines of straightforward words, it is accessible to all kinds of people, yet its depth of meaning satisfies the most sophisticated. I have taught the haiku to college students in classes ranging from developmental English to world literature, as well as to middle school students in a summer enrichment program. With a little instruction, most were able to produce acceptable haiku.

The purpose of this article is to share methods for teaching effective haiku writing. For advanced levels, it includes strategies for teaching students to evaluate haiku translations, to produce their own translations, and to contrast haiku with Western poetry by converting Western poems into haiku.

The experience of writing haiku is valuable to students for a variety of reasons: It exposes them to the aesthetics of another culture; they become more observant of the world around them and more attentive to word choices; and they experience the satisfaction of producing poetry. However, some may have already been taught about haiku by teachers who have only a superficial understanding of it themselves. It may be necessary to clear up several common misconceptions.

## What Haiku is Not

First, it is not absolutely necessary to adhere to a form of five syllables in the first and third lines and seven in the second line. Not all haiku follow the 5-7-5 pattern, even in Japanese, as illustrated by the following haiku by Bashō (1644–1694), which has a 5-9-5 pattern: *kare eda ni / karasu no tomari keru / aki no kure* (On a withered branch / A crow has settled / Autumn nightfall.)<sup>1</sup>

Bashō was the first to elevate the haiku from light amusement to a great literary form, and this haiku, considered one of his greatest, was used as a model by later poets.<sup>2</sup>

Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), also regarded as a haiku master, disliked being constricted by form and often wrote haiku with more or fewer than seventeen syllables. In the following haiku, the first and third line each have five syllables (the final *n* in “giron” is counted as one syllable in Japanese), but the second line has eight (“kaeru” is three syllables): *hibari-ha to / kaeru-ha to uta no / giron kana* (On how to sing / the frog school and the skylark school / are arguing!)<sup>3</sup>

In the following haiku, also by Shiki, the first line has six syllables: *kaerimireba / yukiaishi hito / kasumikeri* (Backward I gaze; / one whom I had chanced to meet / is lost in haze!)<sup>4</sup>

As Japanese poets are not bound by the 5-7-5 form, it makes even less sense for those writing in English to be bound by it. In Japanese, syllable counting is meaningful because syllables are nearly equal in length. In English, however, syllables vary greatly in length, depending on the vowel, the number of consonants, and whether the syllable is stressed. Hiroaki Sato, a successful translator of haiku from Japanese to English, said that he aims for about seventy percent of the syllable count of the original poem in his English translations, that “to impose in translation a 5-7-5 syllable pattern or a form that approximates it may dilute and render ineffectual what is haiku-esque.”<sup>5</sup>

Some haiku writers, both Japanese and English, have even varied the number of lines, but most stay with three, and the second line is usually longer than the first and third.

Another common misconception is that haiku must be about nature. Abstract words such as “nature” and “beauty” normally do not occur in haiku. The idea that haiku are about nature probably stems from the fact that they traditionally contain a season word, whether it be the name of the season itself or a word suggesting a season, such as “cold” or “snow.” However, human beings and their artifacts are not considered an intrusion on the natural scene as they might be in the West. Thus, we have haiku such as the following by Buson (1716–1784): “The piercing chill I feel: / my dead wife’s comb in our bedroom, / under my heel . . .”<sup>6</sup>

In “A lovely thing to see: / through the paper window’s holes / the Galaxy,”<sup>7</sup> Issa (1763–1828) tells of the natural beauty of the stars, but through a hole in a man-made window. When he writes, “When one is old / one is envied by people— / oh, but it’s cold!”<sup>8</sup> Issa uses the season word “cold” to apply to human relationships.

One who assumes that a haiku must be about nature may also assume that the subject matter must be beautiful. However, some haiku are about things we would normally consider ugly or distasteful. For example, Issa, with his characteristic empathy for the unloved, writes, “If the times were good / I’d say, ‘One more of you, sit down,’ / flies around my food.”<sup>9</sup> Other examples are: “In the winter river / thrown away, a dog’s / dead body” by Shiki;<sup>10</sup> “The summer river— / The end of a red iron chain / Soaks in the water” by Yamaguchi Seishi (1901–1994);<sup>11</sup> and a scene from World War II: “In the depths of the flames / I saw how a peony / Crumbles to pieces” by Kato Shuson (1905–1993).<sup>12</sup> The haiku is fresh, precisely because it departs from traditional beautiful subjects such as cherry blossoms and deals with humble ones.

## The First Seeds of Haiku

The haiku is a relative newcomer on the Japanese poetic scene. Poetry in Japan can be traced back to the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*), an anthology compiled in the eighth century. Some poems, known as tanka (short poem), were composed of five lines, the first and third containing five syllables while the second, fourth, and fifth have seven. The tanka became an important instrument of lovemaking among court ladies and gentlemen, but also expressed such themes as the brevity of life.

From the tanka developed the renga (linked verse), in which one poet would write the first three lines (5-7-5), and another would write the last two (7-7). Then the last two lines would serve as the first two lines of another poem to be completed with three (5-7-5) by yet another poet. This linked verse could continue indefinitely with any number of poets taking part. The haiku is an offshoot from the first three lines of the renga. These early three-line poems were noted more for their clever wording than their content, but Bashō in the seventeenth century brought the haiku to new heights by infusing it with layers of meaning that evoked an emotional response.

Today, there are still writers of tanka and renga, forms that have attained some degree of popularity outside Japan, but by far the most popular form worldwide is the haiku.

### What Makes it a Haiku?

To guide students to an understanding of this, *Haiku in English* by translator Harold Henderson (1889–1974) is a good resource. Stating that the haiku must “convey the emotions aroused by one particular event” in the present,<sup>13</sup> he shows some extreme examples of verses which are haiku in form but not in spirit. One is “Egocentric / influential / unsymmetrical,” which Henderson said was “undoubtedly written tongue in cheek.”<sup>14</sup> Though it follows a 5-7-5 pattern, it conveys no emotion and, according to Henderson, is not a poem of any kind.

Lucien Stryk points out that haiku differs from our Western expectations about poetry in that they seldom contain metaphor, simile, or personification, and adjectives and adverbs are rare.<sup>15</sup>

### Haiku Immersion

There is no substitute for exposing students to a generous quantity of good haiku from a variety of writers. The number of haiku and the choice of writers will depend on age and background of students, and available time. When I teach haiku in a first year college English class, I include a good representation of Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, all acknowledged masters of haiku. Donald Keene's *Anthology of Japanese Literature* contains haiku by Bashō, Buson, Issa, and some of their contemporaries,<sup>16</sup> while his *Modern Japanese Literature* contains haiku by Shiki and other twentieth century writers.<sup>17</sup> I include more recent haiku, as well as haiku by English-speaking poets; I include haiku that adhere to traditional rules as well as some that don't.

Ezra Pound's “In a Station of the Metro” (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough”), written in 1913, is a good poem to introduce after some exposure to traditional haiku. Pound was consciously influenced by haiku. According to Lucien Stryk, however, a haiku poet would incorporate the title into the poem itself, omit “the apparition of these” because it contributes no meaning, and omit “crowd” as redundant because

metro stations are usually crowded, thus transforming it: “Faces in the metro— / petals / on a wet black bough.”<sup>18</sup> A comparison of Pound's original poem with Stryk's version could prove insightful to advanced high school or college students.

Students may enjoy haiku by Gary Snyder (b. 1930), of which the following is an example: “After weeks of watching the roof leak / I fixed it tonight / by moving a single board.”<sup>19</sup> Some lively discussion may be generated by the following haiku spoof, entitled “Haiku Ambulance,” by Richard Brautigan (1935–1985): “A piece of green pepper fell / off the wooden salad bowl: / so what?”<sup>20</sup> Both appear in *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, edited by X. J. Kennedy, who presents several pages of haiku and gives little nuggets of advice to aspiring haiku writers:

*Make every word matter. Include few adjectives, shun needless conjunctions. Set your poem in the present . . . Confine your poem to what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. Mere sensory reports, however, will be meaningless unless they make the reader feel something.*<sup>21</sup>

Students may also appreciate Etheridge Knight (1931–1991), an African-American poet who began his poetic career in prison. Two examples are: “Morning sun slants cell / Drunks stagger like crippled flies / On jailhouse floor” and “To write a blues song / is to regiment riots / and pluck gems from graves.”<sup>22</sup>

Richard Wright (1908–1960), an African-American writer best known for his novels *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, became an astute student of the haiku during his last years. Of the approximately 4,000 haiku he composed, 817 were finally published in 1998 under the title *Haiku: This Other World*. Unlike Knight, he adheres strictly to traditional rules: “I am nobody: / A red sinking autumn sun / Took my name away,” and “From a tenement, / The blue jazz of a trumpet / Weaving autumn mists.”<sup>23</sup>

Students may also connect to Gerald Vizenor, a Native American writer, who tells of his discovery of haiku while stationed in Japan:

*Chance and the contradictions of tribal identities would become my sources of incitation as a creative writer. I would have to leave the nation of my birth to understand the wisdom and survivance of tribal literature. How ironic that my service as a soldier would lead me to haiku, and haiku an overture to dream songs.*<sup>24</sup>

Gordon Henry, another Native American writer, wrote a short story entitled “The Prisoner of Haiku.” In it, the main character, identified as “the prisoner,” as a child attended a boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which systematically tried to eradicate Native American languages. When he speaks his native language, the teachers punish him by tying him to an iron post all night during a Minnesota winter. After that experience, he could not speak at all. Eventually, he was exposed to haiku and, seeing the resemblance to dream song, began writing them. The story ends with a collection of his writing, which includes the following: “The river with a / missionary's name wears an / ice face at dawn,” and “Travelers come out / of sun looking for Indian- / made real crafts real cheap.”<sup>25</sup>

William Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* provides good advice on teaching haiku, along with many examples not only in English but also in Spanish, German, French, and many other languages.<sup>26</sup> This excellent resource allows foreign language teachers in high school or college to give students the experience of reading poetry in a foreign language and perhaps to translate it into English.

### Outdoor Inspiration

After spending one or two class periods studying the haiku of others, I take my students outside to inspire them to write fresh, original haiku: it is best they have plenty to stimulate their senses. The following were written by students in my first year English composition classes at West Virginia University Institute of Technology: Seeing the sun / On the east-bound truck / Wanting to catch a ride (Lee Thompson); Delicate wilted flower / Falls on page of poems— / Brushed out of the way (Amber Gourley); fading at the ridge / the colors blend together / the sky and mountain touch (Brianna McGhee); one purple flower / among many blades of grass— / it's outnumbered (Jean Ann Moore).

Students from developmental English classes and students whose native language is not English have been able to write competent haiku. Here are some from my Pakistani students: flowers of different colors / come from the same ground, / but why different colors? (Ikrama Chohan); just reach for the sky / and experience heights / if you can (Haroon Akhtar).

I also teach a dual credit college English course at a nearby high school. When I took my students outside, the elementary school children provided inspiration: kids on playground / hoses spraying cars— / spring has arrived (Justin Walker); children screaming / while playing on the swings, / not wanting to leave (John Valentine).

As students observe their surroundings and write haiku, I write too, and share feedback. I pick out the best of those who've written several and tell what they've done well. Sometimes I point out particularly effective lines and unnecessary words or phrases. When a student writes "green grass," I suggest omitting "green" because readers will assume the grass is green. When a student writes "flower" I suggest "lilac" or "crocus" instead. I steer students away from abstract words like "nature" and "beauty."

When a student has written a particularly good haiku, I might read it to the class. In the days after the assignment, students may polish their haiku or write additional ones. When the haiku have all been turned in, I compile a booklet of the best, including at least one from each student, and distribute it to students for their enjoyment. The best are submitted to a literary magazine.

The project has many benefits. First, it exposes students to an accessible art form from another culture. To appreciate haiku is to understand something of the sensibilities of the Japanese people. Second, it makes them attentive to the way they express themselves on paper. Learning to write concisely and use vivid description is consistent with the goals of most writing classes. Third, they learn to observe their surroundings. Fourth, most will have the satisfaction of producing one or more reasonably competent haiku. Fifth, it makes a great excuse to take the class outside on a warm spring day.

### Students as Translators

In addition to writing original haiku, I have two other projects to suggest. These are definitely not suitable for elementary school children, but work for older students who have an adequate background.

I have done translation projects with college sophomores in a world literature class, with college students in a first year Japanese class, with first year college students in a composition class, and with junior high school students in a one-week summer enrichment program. Most were able to do the project, which also could be used in a high school or college literature class or in a junior high school gifted program.

First, I present students with a few haiku in romanized Japanese accompanied by a word-for-word translation and a sampling of translations by several professional translators. Students then evaluate and compare the translations. Figure 1 is an example of the handout I present to students.

Translations of Bashō's famous "frog" haiku and dozens of others are collected in Hiroaki Sato's *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku in English*.<sup>27</sup>

furu- ike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto old pond; frog jump-in water of sound An old pond / a frog jumps in / sound of water Bashō		
The old pond, A frog jumps in— Plop! R. H Blyth	The ancient pond A frog leaps in The sound of water. Donald Keene	old pond frog leaping splash Cid Corman
The old green pond is silent; here the hop Of a frog plumbs the evening stillness: plop! Harold Stewart		
An old silent pond... A frog jumps into the pond, splash! Silence again. Harry Behn		
Listen! a frog Jumping into the stillness Of an ancient pond! Dorothy Britton	Mossy pond: frog leaping in— splash! William Howard Cohen	The old pond A frog jumped in, Kerplunk! Allen Ginsberg
An old pond A frog jumps in— Sound of water. Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite	Old pond, leap—splash— a frog. Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto	

FIGURE 1

Students usually notice that some translations are more literal than others. Some add words, such as Britton's "stillness," Behn's "silent," and Stewart's "evening stillness." The explanation is probably that Japanese readers would automatically understand the pond was still, but Western readers might not. Students will

also notice translators using words with the same denotation but a different connotation, such as “old” and “ancient.” It can be pointed out that the Japanese “furu” carries a less negative connotation than the English “old.”

Students also notice that Stewart chose to convert the three-line haiku to two lines. An observant student may notice that it’s a couplet in iambic pentameter. Because the 5-7-5 form often seems formless in English, Stewart may have intended to give it a form English speakers would recognize. Students may wonder how much the translator must cater to the needs of readers. The translation by Cohen is especially notable for its extreme economy of words, as is the translation by Stryk and Ikemoto. Though they go against normal syntax, so do many Japanese haiku. Though most translations follow the original Japanese word order, ending with the sound of water in the last line, Stryk and Ikemoto ended with “a frog” while Britton ended with “an ancient pond.” Students could discuss how the emphasis is altered by such choices.

This is probably the students’ first experience in becoming aware of the choices a translator must make, particularly in a language as different from English as Japanese. For example, since Japanese has no articles, the translator must decide whether to use “a,” “the,” or no article. When the translator chooses “the old pond” over “an old pond,” there is a suggestion that the pond is familiar to the poet, thus affecting the emotional impact of the poem. Also, since there is normally no plural ending in Japanese, there could conceivably be more than one pond or frog. However, the preference among translators is overwhelmingly for one pond and one frog, probably because the poem suggests quiet and solitude broken by a single sound.

Students usually come to realize that translation requires a certain amount of interpretation. On the other hand, they usually agree that a translation like “Breaking the silence / Of an ancient pond / A deep resonance” departs too much from the original because the frog was left out completely.

I have made a similar handout based on Bashō’s haiku about the crow at dusk, cited earlier. For this haiku, the translator must decide whether “kare” should be translated as “withered,” “bare,” “barren,” or “leafless.” The translator must visualize the scene well enough to decide whether the crow is “settling,” “roosting,” “balancing,” or “perching.” The mood of the haiku suggests one crow, and translators seem to agree on “crow” rather than “crows.” Britton uses the word “solitary,” which is not expressed in the original, but which is consistent with the meaning. Students sometimes question whether Behn has changed the intent of the haiku by saying the crow is cautious and that it is watching the sunset.

After understanding the choices involved in translating, the next step is for students to try their own hand. Most are surprised at the idea because they have never studied Japanese. However, after being given the original Romanized Japanese, a word-for-word translation, and a literal translation, some students are able to produce acceptable translations. Because of the brevity and simplicity of haiku, as well as its subtlety, it is an especially appropriate form for a translation exercise. The following haiku by Buson is an example:

sara o                    fumu / nezumi no oto    no / samusa kana  
plate [object marker] tread-on mouse of sound of coldness oh!

Translation choices: fumu—treading, stepping, trampling, walking on; nezumi—rat, mouse; article—a, the, or nothing.

Literal translation: Oh the coldness of the sound of a rat stepping on a plate.

Students must choose whether to translate “nezumi” as “rat” or “mouse,” a choice that will influence the flavor of the poem. The translation of “fumu” can also make an important difference. One problem with this haiku is that “coldness” gets special emphasis in the original because of its position in the last line, but because English word order is different from Japanese, it is placed toward the beginning in the literal translation. One first year composition student solved the problem by writing: “Sound of a mouse / Walking on a plate / Oh, the coldness.” Another wrote, “On my plate / I heard a rat scamper / Chills! Yuk!” “Scamper” seems a good choice because it resembles the sound a rat or mouse might make on a plate. “Chills” is an interesting choice because it conveys the coldness and the repulsiveness of the sound. “Yuk” may get across the right sentiment, but with the wrong tone. Bownas and Thwaite, by the way, translate it as “Scampering over saucers— / The sound of a rat. / Cold, cold.”<sup>28</sup>

I have also assigned the following haiku by Shiki, which is more complicated to translate:

hanatare    no / ko ga                    urenokoru /    samusa    kana!  
snot-nosed of child [subject marker] leave-unsold coldness oh!

Translation choices: hanatare (hana=nose, tare=hanging, dripping)—sniveller, driveller, snotty-nosed, dirty nose; urenokoru (uru=sell, nokoru=be left over, left behind)—remain unsold, remain unmarried.

Literal translation: The snot-nosed child is left behind, oh the coldness!

Along with the haiku, I provide this background from R. H. Blyth:

*The prescript to this poem says: ‘A child-selling game in my native Matsuyama.’ In this game, usually for girls, one of two equal teams chooses the most charming child of the other team and tries to get her. This goes on until the least attractive child is left ‘unsold.’ The not very pretty child, running at the nose, is left till last. She stands there stupidly, her hands in her sleeves, unhappy and unlovely, and the cold seems more painful when our eyes rest unwillingly upon her.*<sup>29</sup>

One could interpret the poem to mean that the girl is left out of the game now and will be left behind again in the marriage game. One student translated it: “The snot-nosed child / Unlovely left behind / Oh, the coldness.” “Unlovely” is unnecessary because it is included in the meaning of “snot-nosed,” but otherwise the translation works. Another student translated it, “Children playing games / Snot-nosed child left behind / Oh, see the coldness.” This translation explains the context in which the child was left behind, making it more accessible to readers. Yet another student translation reads: “Snot-nosed child stands alone / The icy chill of rejection / Gray sky of winter.” Although this translation is somewhat redundant, it captures the double meaning of “cold.”

Another student wrote, "The homely little kid/ was left to stand and watch / As the others played." The following student translation gets across the idea that the girl might later be left alone in love relationships: "Child of disdain / Marooned, deserted / Frigidly alone."

When I do this project with students, I usually compile a booklet with what I consider the better translations for each haiku assigned, making sure that as many students as possible are represented at least once. I include a wide variety of translations to show the range of interpretations. Appearing after each translation is "translated by" with the student's name. These could be included in the same booklet of students' original haiku.

Once students get past the initial shock of being asked to translate, they often show considerable creativity and ingenuity. One major difficulty is getting the economy of words distinctive of haiku. Some must get past the idea that the translation should follow a 5-7-5 formula. The project gives students a glimpse of the challenges facing a translator, and insights into the structure of a non-Indo-European language. Furthermore, it helps students pay attention to word choices, which typically leads to better writing skills.

### Haiku as a Different Road to Take

A more difficult project is to convert a well-known English poem to haiku, an assignment that works well in high school and college literature classes. Students need some experience in interpreting literature. One could present it as an option rather than requiring it of the whole class.

A poem that paints a concrete picture and has an identifiable season works well. One student transformed Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" into haiku in this way: "Two roads beg travel / I chose one / For that I'm unique." Another student transformed it as: "Two paths to choose from / Both fair, but one less traveled / I chose the latter." Both capture the essence of the poem, though the specific description of the natural scenery has been lost. My version of it is: "A traveler alone / in a yellow wood: / two roads diverge." It is left for the reader to infer that the traveler must make a choice and that the choice will make a difference in the traveler's life.

Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" also works well for conversion to haiku. One student rendered it: "Golden daffodils / flutter and dance in the breeze / Only poets see." Another wrote: "Golden moments / Found in thought / Of dancing daffodils." Both express the idea that the poet found pleasure in viewing the daffodils and later in reflecting on them.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Spring and Fall" could be rendered "Watching the leaves / Falling in Goldengrove / a child sobs;" and Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," could become "By Paumanok's shore / The mockingbird cries / for his lost mate." Students found these two poems more difficult to render.

Doing this project requires a thorough understanding of the original poem and the criteria for a good haiku. While the result may not be "original" by some people's definitions, it requires a measure of creativity. A reader familiar with the original poems or the geographical areas that inspired them will derive layer upon layer of meaning from the haiku version, just as a Japanese reader

might when reading a haiku written by Bashō on one of his journeys revisiting locations memorialized by earlier poets. It also provides a means of comparing and contrasting haiku with Western poetry, and is an alternative to tests, essays, and response papers as a means to demonstrate understanding of a poem.

Whether students read haiku, write their own haiku, translate haiku from Japanese to English, or convert Western-style poems to haiku, they will be transplanting it into the soil of their own experience. Most will find the haiku takes root quite well. ■

### NOTES

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