

# Haiku—Is It Really a Poem?

Workshop led by Charles Trumbull  
Robert Frost Poetry Festival, Key West, Fla.,  
Friday, April 13, 2007, 2:00–5:00

## I. INTRODUCTIONS

- Round of introductions: each person to say who he/she is and what relations is to poetry & what exposure to haiku

### Schedule:

*Introductory and definitions (about 30 minutes)*

*Aspect-by-aspect comparison of poems with haiku*

*There will be a test at the end of the second hour, as well as a term paper (a very short one, however).*

*About the last hour devoted to some exercises, writing, and critiquing of haiku*

Goal of this session: review the principles of haiku by using regular poetry as a springboard.

“Is a haiku really a poem?”— I say no.

### Pros

*Sorta looks like a poem*

*Has to do with poetic topics like Nature, humans, etc.*

*Shows up in places with poems (e.g., in the corner poetry section of bookstores and at poetry festivals!)*

*What else could it be?*

### Cons

*Most big-time poets in the West don't think English-language haiku is a respectable poem but rather an entertainment for the unserious or a teaching tool for children*

*Verses, yes, but really only one step up from doggerel ...*

*Most important, though: nearly every aspect of a haiku differs from the Western poem, from subject matter, to audience, to form, to aesthetics and poetics. It's just different.*

May be of importance to distinguish between “poetry” and “poem:”

### Definitions of “poetry”

William Wordsworth: “Poetry is the spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility” (introduction to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802)

*Most make reference to meter*

“literature in metrical form” [Princeton]

“texts in rhythmic form, often employing rhyme and usually shorter and more concentrated in language and ideas than either prose or drama.” [Longmans, in a guide for literature students]

*and especially use of language:*

Poetry ... is an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. It consists largely of oral or literary works in which language is used in a manner that is felt by its user and audience to differ from ordinary prose. [Wikipedia]

Poetry- Traditional poetry is language arranged in lines, with a regular rhythm and often a definite rhyme scheme. Nontraditional poetry does away with regular rhythm and rhyme, although is usually set up in lines. The richness of its suggestions, the sounds of its words, and the strong feelings evoked by its line are often said to be what distinguish poetry from other forms of literature....[Thinkquest]

### Definition of “poem”

1. A verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way, characterized by the use of language chosen for its sound and suggestive power and by the use of literary techniques such as meter, metaphor, and rhyme.
2. A composition in verse rather than in prose.
3. A literary composition written with an intensity or beauty of language more characteristic of poetry than of prose.
4. A creation, object, or experience having beauty suggestive of poetry. [Answers.com]

- 1: a composition in verse
- 2: a piece of poetry communicating to the reader the sense of a complete experience
- 3: a creation, experience, or object likened to a poem

### Definition of “haiku”

*“a brief verse about a moment in nature that makes specific reference to a season and juxtaposes two concrete images”*

*a brief verse—the form*

*a moment in nature—subject matter (includes human nature)*

*mention of a specific season*

*juxtaposes concrete images—method and craft*

*this is a normative definition, not exclusive*

*this is also a rule-derived definition might be generalized from the body of haiku that have been composed and are being composed today*

- Read some haiku—keep this definition in mind—discuss

- PAUSE

## II. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POEMS AND HAIKU

### Structure

*This is an easy one.*

*Haiku are very short. Most Western poems are not.*

*Haiku are usually written in 3 lines of irregular length. This looks strange to Western eyes used to symmetry.*

*Haiku traditionally were written by counting syllables, which is also strange for Western poets who are used to counting feet, or if you're an Old Englishman, beats. Don't go into a discussion of Japanese syllables!*

*Harder to see, but haiku aim toward an open construction, beginning and ending in the middle of a thought, while Western poems traditionally prize closure, resolution, and completeness. Look at the structure of a villanelle for one example.*

*Here are two short poems by two contemporary American masters of short poetry:*

CONTINUITY  
A. R. Ammons

I've pressed so  
far away from  
my desire that  
if you asked me what I  
want I would,  
accepting the harmonious  
completion of the drift, say annihilation,  
  
probably.

from *Brink Road* (Norton, 1996)

SKETCHES: BY THE SEA  
Samuel Menashe

1  
That black man running  
Headlong on the beach  
Throws back the white  
Soles of his feet  
Lightning strikes  
Twice on the sand  
Left foot and right,  
My pen in hand

2  
Hearing the sea  
Not seeing it  
On the other side  
Of the dunes  
Is enough for me  
This morning  
The distance I keep  
From the sea I hear  
Brings distance near

3  
 At night, off shore  
 Sometimes the lights  
 On the fishing boats  
 Sink out of sight  
 That string of lights  
 Salt water wets  
 Makes the fish rise  
 To tridents and nets

from *The Niche Narrows: New and Selected Poems*, (Talisman House, 2000)

*Haiku are not all written in three lines, 5-7-5. but it is still safe to say that haiku is form-bound in a way that long poems are not.*

### Constituent parts

*It doesn't really fit my outline, but I need to say something about images, the main building blocks of a haiku.*

*An attempt at a definition of "image" might be "a text that evokes in the reader a strong sensory stimulation."*

*Remember, it was its imagistic nature (as well as exoticism I suspect) that drew the Imagist poets to Oriental verse:*

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
 Petals, on a wet, black bough.  
 Ezra Pound

*We usually think of visual images, but they could also be appeals to our senses of touch, smell, sound, taste. The Japanese recognize a sixth sense too: memory.*

*Image is crucial to haiku: it is, recall, the juxtaposition of two concrete images*

*One image is usually included in one line, either first or last, and usually establishes the season:*

why does the mandarin duck  
 float alone —  
 first winter rain

Chiyo-ni, trans. Donegan & Ishibashi

*The second image is usually contained in the longer section, which has an element of action to it.*

*A major index of the success of a haiku is the distance between the two image, which has been compared to the gap of a spark plug. Here are two haiku by the same poet, the first is easy to grasp, the second one defeats me:*

old stone wall  
 a single spider strand  
 closes the gap

corn maze  
 a cricket escapes  
 from between my hands  
 paul m. [Paul Miller]

*Do these haiku have two images?*

nothing in the mailbox  
but a crisp brown leaf  
Stuart Quine

half-sunk in sand  
the polished indigo  
of mussels  
Martin Lucas

### Subject matter

*It would be hard to say what the subject of a Western poem is: it could be anything.*

*One very common feature of Western poetry, though, is the presence of the first person singular. Poems are usually about what the poet thinks about something—just consider the Confessional poets like Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton.*

*Haiku is more restrictive: (ostensibly) about nature exclusively, but this can include human nature. In fact, the best haiku link nature and human nature, or use a moment in nature to illuminate human nature.*

*But generally, the “I” does not belong in haiku. Haiku readers don’t care what you think: don’t tell me about it, show it to me in concrete images!*

*There is a related form, senryu, that deals exclusively with human nature. Barry George will be telling us lots more about that tomorrow.*

*These are haiku:*

on a bare branch  
a crow has alighted ...  
autumn nightfall  
Bashô

winter prairie—  
a diesel locomotive  
throttles down in the night  
Lee Gurga

*These are senryu:*

In a sudden shower a woman covers her obi first  
Sakai Sobaijo

smooth cold plastic  
into one ear at a time  
the sounds of morning  
Christopher Herold

*Especially in the West, the distinction is blurred, as more and more people write on a wider variety of topics:*

New Year’s Day  
subways  
sounding brighter  
Jack Stamm

## Purpose

*Doing (note the “doing”) haiku is a way of life, a discipline.*

*Haiku is itself the subject of human activity*

*People who affirm this usually link haiku writing to Zen practice, the Tao, or perhaps some form of Oriental meditation, as does Vincent Tripi, whose haiku are often close to Zen koans*

Rain  
where is the salmon  
going?

Vincent Tripi, *Somewhere among the Clouds*

*In Japan, the doing of haiku is considered an activity separate from that of the (long-) poet or the writer of tanka, and the disciplines rarely meet. (Not so much so in the West)*

*Writing poems is a vocation or an avocation, rather an object for human activity. I.e., product, not process.*

*Poems are often used to call attention to social problems or to try to persuade a reader this way or that. Good haiku rarely, if ever, do this. Look what happens when a Western poet, Victor Hernández Cruz, tried his hand at haiku. He titles this “Movement of Molasses”:*

MOVEMENT OF MOLASSES

Men argue honor  
While twenty blocks away their  
Women train horsies

## Audience:

*Probably not much difference between longpoets and haiku poets in the target audience: it ranges from very personal, to entertaining family and close friends, to publishing and harvesting accolades from far and wide.*

*My sense is that writing longpoems, however, is a relatively solitary pursuit, and even a bit competitive. Does anyone really think of enriching the general corpus of poetry when writing a poem?*

*Haiku is a collective undertaking, at least in Japan:*

It may not be too fanciful to visualize Japanese haiku poets reaching up to the Great Sphere of the Seasons where all foregoing haiku reside, reverently selecting and detaching a small piece with which to prime their own verse, then returning the kigo to its place in the heavens together with the new verse, thereby using the kigo, addressing their peers in a common language, fitting their verse into 1,000-plus years of Japanese culture, and enriching the whole enterprise—all at the same time. [CT, *Acorn* supplement]

*In Japan, many haiku are composed at a gathering of a haiku group: a ginko, kukai, or other collective activity, and the approval of the sensei and the group are much solicited and valued.*

## Milieu

*Writing poems, again, seems solitary in comparison to haiku. A new poem is a one-off affair and must always seem fresh, not hackneyed, or, heaven help us, plagiarized.*

*Haiku, esp. in Japan, is part of an integrated whole. One is conscious of writing in the haiku milieu, adding to it and improving it.*

*A triumph for a haiku poet is finding an original twist on an age-old theme, such as cherry blossoms, leafy trees, or the moon.*

*In Japan, if the sensei changes all but one word of your haiku, it is still yours. Many haiku are literally the same as the classics with one slight change. The idea is that you are building on a great foundation.*

## Sense of place

*Haiku, again, is more rule-bound than Western poetry, and Western haiku poets are struggling with their identity: how much should they identify with Japan. The term “Japanesy” (rhymes with “cheezy”) has been coined as a term of scorn for haiku that are too much taken with the exotic. This was especially a problem in the early years of Western haiku, as in this verse by Amy Lowell (1874–1925), who, I believe, never visited Japan:*

Under red umbrellas with cream-white centres,  
A procession of Geisha passes  
In front of the silk-shop of Matsuzaka-ya.

*Margaret Chula is an American who lived for many years in Kyoto. Her haiku are often on Japanese themes, but she avoids cultural dislocation:*

color of her kimono  
flows into the teabowl  
one mind

Margaret Chula, *Frogpond* 17:1 (spring 1994)

*I view the American haiku as now separated from the Japanese haiku, respectfully acknowledging its origins, but now fully independent.*

*Several American poets of the stature of Robert Bly, Sam Hamill, and Robert Hass, however,—all of whom have translated haiku from Japanese—have publicly said that they do not consider English-language haiku worthwhile. On our side, however, we have luminaries like Billy Collins, Alan Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, and Paul Muldoon, all of whom have published books of haiku.*

*Western poets have long since reconciled themselves to the Italian origins of the sonnet and the French origins of the villanelle—and even the Persian ghazal.*

## Viewpoint

*Haiku looks inward for the truth*

mouse stirs  
in the kitchen cupboard;  
winter solitude

Eric Amann, *Cicada Voices* (1983)

*The very best haiku explore our inner mindscapes; lacking such introspection, a haiku is banal and flat.*

*In recent times, Americans have been using haiku also to look outward, like much Western poetry, to engage the Universe in external terms: philosophical, emotional, social, and political. They believe we*

*cannot limit subject matter to a small segment of what is really important in our lives. Traditional haiku would not touch on interpersonal relationships, but Alexis Rotella does so in her famous “After an Affair” sequence:*

Wild touch-me-nots:  
you never  
touch me

Alexis Rotella, *After an Affair* (1984)

*Haiku poets now write about social ills: AIDS, the environment, man’s inhumanity to man (and women), war ...*

uncomfortable —  
body armor shifting  
on the car seat

Kylan Jones-Huffman, Cricket Internet mailing list

## Aesthetics

*So what are Western aesthetics and poetics anyhow? This is tricky turf, but I would suggest that, insofar as the term is applied to poetry and haiku, Western aesthetics would include an analytical approach, intellectualization and abstraction of sense-derived experiences, and morality and other involvement of the human psyche.*

*Arguably, Issa is the haiku master to whom Americans can most readily relate.*

I’m leaving —  
now you can make love,  
my flies.

Issa, trans. Stryk

*Issa’s deep concern for small, abject creatures, explained in the haikai context as a Buddhist idea of the undifferentiated nature of all things, is read in the West quite differently, rather as human empathy, the same sort of attraction we feel we get from the eyes of the subjects in a manga drawing or the heavy-duty emotions of a Tchaikovsky symphony.*

*Haiku aesthetics: Obviously haiku aesthetics are of fundamental concern for Japanese haiku, but some would consider the inclusion of Oriental aesthetics as a characteristic that distinguishes Western-language haiku from other poetic forms. The sensibility of a haiku include, among others, (to use William J. Higginson’s words in *The Haiku Handbook*) aware—“the poetic expression of impermanence; the evocation of the transient,” sabi—the feeling of an individual’s aloneness in the cosmos, or as Higginson says, “the spirit of loneliness, is the yearning for connection” wabi—a recognition of the profundity of the humble and everyday; the spirit of poverty, yûgen—“Beauty of mystery and depth, often combined with other effects such as elegance, refinement, ambiguity, darkness, calm, ephemerality, and sadness.” [Ueda, 429] These sensibilities are interrelated in aspects such as mystery and numinousness and, most of all, loneliness and sadness. This is why autumn is the favored season for Japanese haiku poets. They are very far removed from common Western esthetics and to some degree are exclusive of them.*

*sabi:*

along this road  
no one travels;  
autumn evening

Bashô

the long night  
of the mannequins —  
snow falling

Martin Shea



*wabi:*

An old pond  
A frog jumps in  
The sound of the water.  
Bashô

moored to the pilings  
the rusting ferryboat  
rides the morning tide  
Leroy Kanterman

*yûgen*

The skylark:  
Its voice alone fell,  
Leaving nothing behind.  
Ampû

daybreak —  
from the bread truck's roof  
frost swirls  
Tom Clausen

*aware, mono no aware. "Moving, stirring; the kind of thing that evokes an emotional response"*  
(Higginson)

misty rain;  
today it is good for once  
not to see Fuji  
Bashô

*karumi: "Karumi, 'lightness' ... is the attempt to convey the religious attitude of a tranquility which 'accepts all things as they come.'"*

a white chrysanthemum —  
however closely I look  
not a speck of dust  
Bashô

## Poetics

*If Western poetry is analytical, comparative, and intellectual, some of its main poetic tools are figures such as metaphor, simile, and personification. Rhyme is characteristic of Western poetry, as are other devices that invite comparison of the sounds of words in a poem such as consonance, assonance, etc. These are not typical of haiku, at least recently.*

*Metaphor and simile are disqualified on the grounds that haiku are about concrete things: a thing is not itself if we call it something else!*

*None of these are appropriate to haiku. Viz:*

Mock orange is snow,  
ruby-throated hummingbird  
sledding over it.  
Carrow DeVries

Like an athlete  
naked  
that birch at daybreak!  
Félix-Antoine Savard

*But Paul O. Williams has called haiku itself an “unresolved metaphor” that is, the whole haiku can be viewed as a metaphor that awaits the participation of the reader to complete it*

on the wind  
dandelion seeds,  
church chimes

Paul O. Williams

*Similarly, personification (making nonhuman objects act or react as if they were human) and the pathetic fallacy (attributing human sentience to inanimate objects) are seen to violate the nature of things.*

*And on the subject of poetics, one common trick in haiku is the “pivot line”: Williams’s haiku might have been written:*

dandelion seeds  
on the wind  
church chimes

*Rhyme is usually avoided because the haiku is so short and its use makes the haiku sound like a nursery rhyme or advertising jingle.*

Over the warriors summer grasses wave:  
The aftermath of dreams, however brave.  
Bashô, trans. Stewart

*compare with this lean translation by Stryk:*

Summer grasses,  
all that remains  
of soldiers’ dreams.

*You can decide if the rhyme is a plus or minus for this author who tries to use it creatively:*

Blossoms that held bees  
now leave with the gentle breeze  
from butterfly wings.  
James W. Hackett

*unless humor is the intention. as in this senryu:*

all the stars we’d miss  
if we had a place inside  
to piss

Don Eulert

*Haiku, even in Japan, does use other poetic devices that are familiar in the West, but they should be used in moderation too, for example:*

*assonance:*

Still going strong  
after blocks and blocks of stops:  
my doling dog.  
James W. Hackett

*consonance:*

tenement roof:  
tilted tv antenna  
touches moon.  
Nicholas Virgilio

*and onomatopoeia*

rumble of thunder  
the boy still looking for the ball  
in the tall grass

Lee Gurga

## Language

*Haiku tries to represent a moment without using words: the Wordless Poem*

*Haiku must be written in language brief and straightforward—telegraphic and even laconic. “The wordless poem” is the ideal—the language (as well as punctuation and other physical aspects of the haiku) should be as close to invisible as possible. Language is an imperfect medium for transmitting a moment of perception, emotion, or insight; therefore careful attention must be paid to making it as efficient a conductor as possible. Regarding brevity in haiku, hark to Robert Spiess’s words that “the more words the more distance, the more silence the more proximity.” (Spiess, New and Selected Speculations, No. 296.) Our objectives in using language might be characterized as “simplicity,” “economy,” and “succinctness.”*

*Western poems exult in the use of language:*

The Rose and Thistle.  
Where the hummingbird drops in  
to wet his whistle.

Paul Muldoon, “News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm,”

*Listen to what Fr. Raymond Roseliep wrote:*

The most obvious way we can begin to make haiku more our property is to exploit our fabulous native tongue. English can be as musical as only a poet knowing the keyboard can make it, or as cacophonous as he may wish to make it too. Within our miraculous sound system we have cadences, rhythms, measures, movements, stops, pauses, rimes (!). We possess a gigantic vocabulary—and oh what we can do with words when we arrange them! Since phrasing is vital to haiku, our supple American idiom stands ready for achieving any effect desired, and waits only the hand of the poet to manage it.

*He is a pioneer of American haiku, but he aroused some skepticism for his “nonhaiku” views like this!*

## Zen

*Arguments are raging as to how much haiku and Zen are soulmates. Hallmarks of Zen in haiku include  
the search for man’s inner nature*

how piteous!  
under a helmet  
a cricket

Bashô, trans. Ueda

*exquisite awareness of the world around oneself*

By the azalea  
crock, she strips  
dried codfish.

Bashô, trans. Stryk

*experiencing the unity of the whole in a particular detail*

The distant mountains  
so much nearer in the eyes  
of a dragonfly!

Issa, trans. Cid Corman

*the interrelatedness of all things*

becoming flowers  
becoming water drops —  
this morning's snow

Chiyo-ni, trans. Donegan & Ishibashi

*Can you find the Zen in these haiku by Americans?*

thunderstorm —  
sunflowers  
in a blue vase

Carolyn Hall

new milkweed pods  
one tie goes up and down  
under the freight train

Paul MacNeil

*Western poems are under no such “taint,” unless one means Western culture as a whole. It’s an interesting conjecture whether Japanese Zen can be replaced in Western haiku with a specific Western philosophy. The French haiku poet and scholar Georges Friedenkraft (“Style and Spirit in French Haiku”) suggests that French haiku poets could replace Zen with a core European philosophy such as the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre.*

[T]he seasonal word is not always present in French haiku and the “weight of being” is no longer related to the enlightenment of Japanese Buddhism, but rather, to a non-religious existentialist stance ... as exemplified by Jean Paul Sartre and his followers—and which, in poetry, would be the description of a strong emotional moment, as such of which Daniel Richard writes when hearing a false note:

*Une fausse note!  
on tressaille quand  
le tonnerre éclate*

A false note!  
trembling when  
the thunder then breaks out  
Daniel Richard, *Le jardin japonais*

*One aspect of Zen has been incorporated in American haiku and seems to be sticking somewhat: spontaneity. Hallowed by the Beats, who after all, were very interested in Zen and came to haiku through their Buddhist studies. Maybe Jack Kerouac for his use of haiku: the image of him and his friends tossing off haiku as they climb the Sierras or dash frenetically back and forth across the country is appealing to the haiku mystique: the feeling that haiku are arising spontaneously from the very living of the poets’ lives.*

The trees, already  
bent in the windless  
Oklahoma plain

Jack Kerouac, Trip-Trap

### III. SUMMARY

A poem celebrates the beauty of words; it tends toward the complex, florid, and gorgeous. A haiku focuses on the economy of words; it tends toward the simple, telegraphic, and enigmatic.

A poem is usually subjective, intellectual, witty. A haiku is objective, emotional, perhaps ironic.

A poem is speculative, describing what could be or should be. A haiku is concrete and describes what is.

So, a haiku is not a poem—though it may be poetry

- Test: Try a haiku reduction [give out three poems]

#### DUST OF SNOW

Robert Frost

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.

#### FOG

Carl Sandburg

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

spraddling a hemlock branch,  
black crow — out of myself too  
the falling snow

D.J. Peel

Pitter, pause, patter --  
A cat stalking the city --  
Fog!

CPT

#### LOVELIEST OF TREES, THE CHERRY NOW

A.E. Houseman

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

### BREAK

#### IV. HAIKU EXERCISES

- Find some Key West (or South Florida, or Caribbean) season words
- Writing haiku
- Reading and critique /discussion