

# Haiku Poetry

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# Haiku

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## Referred to as Hokku in Japan

- Medieval poetry form dating from early Japanese culture; originally began in twelfth century court traditions, restricted to noble class, however, by sixteenth century the verse had spilled over into all of Japan as a popular form of writing. Even the common working class were composing them: farmers, fishermen, hunters and monks, men and women.
- In English, it consists of three lines of verse, totaling no more than 17 syllables; traditionally shown:

5 syllables,

7 syllables,

5 syllables

Enough of dawn light

To show pearly pear blossom

Burning from within.

Wright, Richard. "219." *Haiku: This Other World*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.

# Haiku

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- In Japanese, usually no more than 10 words are necessary; traditionally they display the writing in columns, ranging from one to three columns.
- Contemporary English writers favor using a less rigid formula when constructing their poems; they simply use 17 syllables in any combination of lines, without restriction of how they appear or are placed.

Allen Ginsberg, a poet of the Beat Generation, was heavily influenced by Eastern philosophies, created a concept called the American Sentence.

His interpretation of the haiku formula display the poem as one long sentence, consisting of 17 syllables, yet following the other traditional elements of haiku.

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**Traditionally, even though haiku are terse poems, the verse should:**

- establish a vignette scene
- show intense insight, or a tight epiphany moment
- depict a natural landscape
- utilize a target or seasonal word
- In Japanese versions, *onomatopoeias* are often used. These are words which imitate a sound, such as:

*Boom! Ah! Oh!*

- They act as a *caesura* which is a pause for breath or reflection.

When translating the works into English, the translator will use sometimes use a dash, or an exclamation point or an ellipses to show the pause:

!    ...    —

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- contrasting dualism are required for the themes; the poems require taking two polar opposites and showing a sameness between them:

near/far

life/death

sound/silence

spirit/matter

- Themes often center on images and senses.
- The poems often reflect on humanity's placement within nature or humanity's connection/disconnection with nature
- Most importantly, they center on the beauty of nature, *not* the angry, destructive side of nature: such as earthquakes, flood, or plaques.

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**Editor Fabian Bowers indicates that a general formula consists using three elements in the themes as well:**

- **what:** the poet reacts to a sensory impression: sight/sound/smell or taste
- **where:** usually the scene takes place outdoors at a specific natural setting
- **when:** season must be indicated in some fashion using symbolic elements  
(autumn is the season most often used in these poems)

## **Seasonal key symbols:**

haze — spring

clouds — summer

mist/fog — autumn

snow / ice — winter

frog — late spring

wisteria blossom — late spring

plum blossom — New Year

morning glories — summer

# *Haiku*

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## **Matsuo Bashō**

Bashō is considered one of the Haiku Masters. He lived from the second half of the 17th century from 1644-1694. His work is among the most translated and most quoted. He raised the art form to a new level broadening the perspective of casual experience out of ordinary events and creating a heightened sense of spiritual and mental awareness.

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## Three translations of a poem by Matsuo Bashō

On dead branches crows remain perched  
at autumn's end.

—Hiroaki Sato

•

on a barren branch  
a raven perched—  
autumn dusk

—William J. Higginson

•

On a leafless bough  
A crow is sitting: —autumn,  
Darkening now—

—Harold Gould Henderson



# Haiku

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## **In his works as a whole:**

- Bashō shows humanity and nature working together in order to establish a strong sense of meditation or peace of mind
- he shows a fusion of spiritual insight and awareness of humanity's placement in the wilderness
- he attempts to understand the *spirit* of nature because nature symbolizes the enlightened self
- he addresses a conflict between humans and nature, not between good and evil