

Exploring the Infinite Within the Small Cell of a Poem

To possess or rather be possessed by a poem is to allow yourself, through choice, to be carried along and confront and connect to the unimagined. To be swept along the current of words holding new possibilities of knowing, new possibilities of experiencing.

"I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." - *Hamlet, II.ii*

Perhaps the best or rather most immediate way to experience that is through the simple beauty of the **haiku**. Because of the brevity of its structure, it leaves you no place to turn but inward toward contemplation. In many ways the effective haiku captures, though more elegantly, the intensity of the English couplet and its aphoristic nature. The haiku, however, is less direct, less didactic. Instead of instructing forcefully, it does so through "an offered exploration." The lesson is yours as a reader to find, yours to contemplate and personalize as your own.

***Imprisoned beneath the leaf
An anemone watching
The world's sadness pass.***

-- Yaha



The Haiku

Haiku is distinguished by its compression and suggestiveness. It consists of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Traditionally and ideally, a haiku presents a pair of contrasting images, one suggestive of time and place, the other a vivid but fleeting observation. Working together, they evoke mood and emotion. The poet does not comment on the connection but leaves the synthesis of the two images for the reader to perceive. The haiku below by the poet Basho, considered to have written the most perfect examples of the form, illustrates this duality:

*The autumn full moon
All night long
I paced around the lake.*

A traditional haiku poem of 17 syllables is composed of three lines [or word groups], usually unrhymed, of these number of syllables:

- Line #1: five syllables
- Line #2: seven syllables
- Line #3: five syllables

As with any form or prescribed structure, the poet is of course free to bend the rules.

Haiku is brief and compressed and suggests rather than explains.

Robert Bly in *Leaping Poetry*, speaks beautifully and admiringly of the craft of Pablo Neruda. BUT his words also apply to any gifted writer or poet who is able to capture “a something” for her reader.

“We often feel elation reading Neruda because he follows some arc of association which corresponds to the inner life of the objects [I would suggest also the word experiences]; so that anyone sensitive to the inner life of objects [again, experiences] can ride with him.”

The Care of the Small Word

Articles (the use of **a, an, the**) are one of the most underrated powerhouses in the language. What seems a simple enough thing--an adjective or modifier, can significantly alter and personalize the way its subject is thought about, its specificity. To drive this lesson home. Consider the following list of nouns (some abstract and some concrete). Notice how changing the simple article changes the distance and connotation you the reader will make with the noun.

a decision	<i>contrasted with</i>	the decision
a belief	<i>contrasted with</i>	the belief
a choice	<i>contrasted with</i>	the choice
a one	<i>contrasted with</i>	the one
a wind	<i>contrasted with</i>	the wind
a power	<i>contrasted with</i>	the power
a fear	<i>contrasted with</i>	the fear

a single fan, alone in the stands **a** bird dancing in rhythm with **the** wind
the single fan, alone in the stands **the** bird dancing in rhythm with **a** wind



Haiku and Metaphor

A well done haiku is about the meeting of two ideas in an unexpected or unlooked for way. In this way the haiku is about making a thoughtful metaphor. The beauty then comes in the careful selection of words or just the right words to produce a connotative effect which can bring both surprise and joy. It is this careful attention to diction that is demanded of any good poet as well as any good writer. The key may be in the revision, so time should be taken to really pay attention to craft.

TEN EXAMPLES

Now the swinging bridge
Is quieted with creepers ...
Like our tendrilled life

How silent and still!
In the heart of the rocks sinks
The cicada's shrill

On a withered bough
A crow alone is perching;
Autumn evening now.

Now how dear to me
Seems my father's rage when I
Shattered the flower.

As I clap my hands
With the echoes, dawn arrives —
The lone summer moon.

The lone traveler
Walks on, scratching his lice bites;
Spring draws to a close.

In the misty rain,
Mount Fuji is veiled all day.
Look! the silent coi.

The sad bough droops
Offering a single leaf.
His ancient eyes weep.

Come to my arms child
Enfold this heart beating here.
Ants obey not time.

Beneath the boughs
The soup with fish and vegetables
Flecked with cherry petals.



Exercise in Taking Care in Word Choice

Read through each of the ten Haikus on the provided page. Choose three that you will work with and experiment by substituting words from the original with carefully chosen words, words that might be synonyms, might increase the specificity of the idea, words that might even completely change the original image or experience. You may also exchange the articles (a, an, the).

Haiku Rewrite #1

Original

My Rewrite

Haiku Rewrite #2

Original

My Rewrite

Haiku Rewrite #3

Original

My Rewrite



Reflection on the Exercise

Select one of the three rewrites that you have completed and answer the following four questions:

1. Compared to its original form, what do you think is the key difference that you notice when reading the two versions?

2. Have your alterations improved or weakened the original poem in any way? Can you explain?

3. Does the new version of the haiku allow the reader to reconsider the subject/experience in a new way? What is that new way?

