

Haiku and Ecology

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Introduction

A haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things. (R. H. Blyth in Suzuki, 1970)

Haiku is a form of traditional Japanese poetry, most noted for its simple and specific format of three lines with a total of seventeen syllables following a 5-7-5 pattern (Edwards, 2001 p. 159). However, despite their apparent simplicity and brevity haiku hide much deeper meanings and worldviews, which will be discussed in this article.

Traditionally containing a suggested time, such as a season, and an observation of a moment in nature, such as a bee landing on a flower, haiku encapsulate the beauty of the ordinary world around us. Some may think that such a short poem with a distinct lack of metaphors and other such rhetorical devices could not possibly be loaded with a deep philosophical outlook on life. However, through this essay I shall be exploring the underlying ideas and principles behind haiku and also looking at what they can teach us about the world, with focus on the lessons they teach on how to respect and cherish the environment around us.

Principles and history behind haiku

The word *haiku* is said to have been coined by Shiki, who was responsible for starting modern haiku writing in early twentieth century Japan, saying that a haiku should be a “sketch from nature” (Ross, 2002 p. 12). But what does this mean? Simply a description of a moment where the author experienced an aspect of the natural world? That is true, but it means much more than that.

Previous to haiku, *waka* was an already established form of poetry in Japan which, like the later haiku, contained a strict number of syllables; thirty-one divided into five separate sections following a five-seven-five-seven-seven pattern (Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 9). For example,

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Haru no no ni</i> | Coming with a light heart |
| <i>sumire tsumi ni to</i> | To pick some violets |
| <i>ko shi ware zo</i> | I found it difficult to leave |
| <i>no o natsukashimi</i> | And slept overnight |
| <i>hitoyo ne ni keru</i> | Here in this spring field |

(Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 9)

As these older, longer forms of Japanese poetry were well suited for expressing emotions, they quickly became popular amongst courtiers. However, in an attempt to make their conversations more witty and playful, courtiers broke these *waka* into two distinctive halves of five-seven-five and seven-seven (Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 10). For example,

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Okuyama ni,</i> | How is it that I hear |
| <i>fune kogu oto no,</i> | The noise of creaking oars |
| <i>kikoyuru wa</i> | In the deepest mountains? |

Nareru konomi ya Because of the ripening fruits
umi wataru ramu That rub against wood as oars do
(Nobuyuki, 1966 p.10)

Occasionally, the order of these two sections would be reversed to give more equality between the two speakers and greater stance to exercise their wit (Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 11). For example:

Ta ni hamu koma wa, The horse grazing on the bank,
kuro ni zo ari keru Seems to me black in colour

Nawashiro no, I think it otherwise,
mizu ni wa kage to, For its reflection in the paddy
mie tsure do Says chestnut-brown
(Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 11)

This linked verse, or *renga*, continued to be written throughout the Heian period (794-1191) and is considered by some to be the earliest form of haiku poetry since here is the first time we see that five-seven-five section being recognised as a poetic unit (Nobuyuki, 1966 p. 11).

In relation to what is said, the traditional haiku consists of two main features. The first being the mention of a *kigo*, meaning a seasonal word such as Spring or Autumn, or a *kidai*, meaning a seasonal topic such as falling leaves (Crowley, 2007 p. 54). *Kigo* are an integral part of haiku since they place each individual haiku into its respective season, thus allowing the reader to imagine the situation and extra details about the environment (Stibbe, 2007). By referring to a season, haiku also allow readers to conjure the emotions associated with the season, thus allowing an array of words and thoughts to enter the readers head without them having to be physically written down (Yasuda, 1957). The second feature is describing a relationship between two beings or images, such as a frog and a pond, and then separating them with a *kireji* (cutting word) which acts like a punctuation mark (Ross, 2002 p.13).

Basho

Matsuo Basho, son of a samurai, lived from 1644 to 1694. He studied calligraphy, Japanese and Chinese and poetry in Kyoto but spent many of his years living in Edo (today, Tokyo). Often referred to as Japan's supreme poet he was, without doubt, the master of haiku (Bott, 1998 p. 40).

At the age of twenty-eight, Basho had an anthology of haiku published titled *The Seashell Game* (Weston, 2002 p. 100). He worked for several years for the waters department in Edo but, as his status as a poet gradually grew and spread, Basho found himself working full-time as a poetry teacher (Weston, 2002 p. 101). Working with his apprentices, Basho produced six anthologies with the second containing one of his most famous haiku,

*An ancient pond
a frog jumps in-
the sound of water.*

(Weston, 2002 p. 102)

Some scholars may argue that this haiku may be considered as an allegory for 'the smallness of man's works in the sight of God' (Weston, 2002 p. 102). However, this

contradicts an idea that will be discussed later with relation to the simplicity of haiku, whereby they are not supposed to be considered as metaphors or to have multiple meanings. So, by teaching a new generation of poets, Basho quickly established the notion of the haiku (or *hokku* as it was known at the time), thus launching haiku as 'one of Japan's most vital arts' (Bossy et al., 2001 p. 15).

In 1684, Basho decided to leave Edo to travel and embarked on three major trips in the following five years. During this time, he wrote journals of his travels which are said to be some of his finest work (Weston, 2002 p. 103). The journals of these long travels are often based upon the notion of *sabi*, which is untranslatable but includes, among other things, the idea that by immersing oneself completely in the natural world, man can achieve a spiritual peace (Bossy et al., 2001 p. 15).

Roles of plants and animals

Haiku, by their very existence, demonstrate recognition of special worth in the subjects they describe - enough worth to stimulate the poet to carefully craft a poem about them. (Stibbe, 2007 p. 4)

Plants and animals play an integral role in haiku and will usually take on one of three roles: agent, senser, or addressee. The most common of these three roles is agent, whereby plants or animals are represented as being 'actively involved in leading their own lives for their own purposes' (Stibbe, 2007 p. 5). For example, flowers bloom, crows fly, snakes slither etc.

The second most common role, which is usually taken by animals, is that of senser in mental processes, whereby animals are described as thinking or feeling or knowing (Stibbe, 2007 p. 5). This role, I think, is the most important when it comes to encouraging care and responsibility towards the environment. Western environmental discourse tends to treat animals as producers and units, discouraging readers from considering them as living beings with mental lives actively making their way in the world. Haiku, on the other hand, give identities and personalities to them which encourage the readers to visualise the animals and plants in a positive way and thereby become more appreciative and emotionally attached.

The third most common role that plants and animals play in haiku is that of addressee in clauses, whereby the author engages and speaks directly to the plant or animal (Stibbe, 2007 p. 5). This, in my opinion, demonstrates an element of respect that the author has to whatever it is he or she is talking to since, in a hierarchical sense, the plant or animal is of a high enough status to be worthy of speaking to.

A much rarer role that plants and animals will occasionally take is the *affected* participant in material processes whereby, for example, a flower is being picked or a heron is being shot (Stibbe, 2007 p. 5). The *affected* role is often given to animals in discourses of the west, treating animals as objects to which something is done (e.g., *Fish are caught*). However, the main difference is that in haiku, these actions are usually followed by feelings of regret or sympathy at the fact that a living being has been harmed or disturbed at the hands of a human being (Stibbe, 2007 p. 6). I think this is important as it teaches us to reflect on and, in many cases, regret the damage we ourselves have inflicted on the natural world, thus encouraging us to think twice in the future and to become more environmentally aware and friendly.

What we can learn from haiku

The following features underlie the discourse of nature haiku. Knowledge of the principles can help in understanding and appreciating deeper meanings when reading. Reading and appreciating haiku can, in turn, lead to new ways of viewing and interacting with nature.

Awareness

This refers to being aware of the immediate environment - the ability to stop and see everything without distracting thoughts of other things. This is also referred to as 'centering' because if the rational part of the mind quietens, and nagging thoughts, grievances etc. are left behind, it is possible to reach a state of equilibrium and see things simply for how they are (Reichhold, 2003 p. 17).

Non-judgementalism

In our everyday lives we are constantly bombarded with people telling us that things are either good or bad, thus creating a hierarchy among natural phenomena. For example, dogs are a man's best friend whilst on the other end of the spectrum, the common rat is seen as vermin to be exterminated. This kind of judgemental thinking is said to disrupt our peace of mind (Reichhold, 2003 p. 17). Subsequently, one of the main principles of haiku is trying to stop seeing things as good or bad and simply appreciating them for what they are and the more we can do that, the more we can appreciate the beauty of the world around us (Reichhold, 2003 p. 18). Apart from rare exceptions, haiku regards all life forms with positivity, with writers, such as Issa even showing positive regard towards mosquitoes and fleas (Stibbe, 2007). To illustrate, here is a haiku about a rat written by Japanese poet and painter, Yosa Buson,

*Walking on dishes
the rat's feet make the music
of shivering cold* (Abercrombie, 2007 p. 116)

There is no mention of how rats are perceived by people or the status they are given, rather this haiku merely captures the essence of a rat being what it is, with some empathy for the suffering of the cold rat too.

Reverence

As Reichhold (2003 p. 18) describes, 'to appreciate the smallness that is the grandness of haiku one needs a reverence for life'. By this she means that, not only do we have to think kindly of other people and have a gentle understanding and appreciation for other living things, we should also have a respectful view of things we would not normally consider as living beings such as rivers, mountains and burrows (Reichhold, 2003 p. 18). Only when we start to consider everything in the natural world as being sacred, which really it is, can we relate to the environment in a much more responsible and enlightened manner. This can be taken into an ecological context by saying that when we truly appreciate our interdependence and coexistence with everything in nature, how could we possibly pollute and destroy the world we are part of?

Oneness

Perhaps the most crucial element of haiku is *satori*, or the ‘moment of enlightenment’ by becoming ‘conscious of the Unconscious’ (Suzuki, 1970 p. 220). This describes being at one with nature because, in order to produce haiku, one must experience this moment of enlightenment in order to experience oneness with the plants and animals. Only when this oneness is experienced is it possible to fully respect nature and want to preserve it.

Simplicity

Unlike many other forms of poetry, haiku demands to be simple (Reichold, 2003 p. 20). This not only applies to the linguistic features of the poem, but also the topics of the poem. There is clear focus on everyday, some may say mundane, plants and animals such as mosses, pigeons, grasses and spiders. This focus is important to haiku as it teaches us, the reader, to see beings that we experience in everyday life in a different light; we can go into our gardens and watch an ant walking to its nest, while to see something as unusual as an elephant, we would have to go to the artificial environment of a zoo, and watch elephants manifestly not being themselves (Stibbe, 2007 p. 4). Linking this thought to the reverence featured in haiku, we can say that haiku encourage us to cherish our local environments and want to preserve those with just as much perseverance conservationist discourse wants us to save endangered species.

Appreciating the plants and animals that are around us in our everyday lives, directly encountering them, understanding that they are being themselves, and placing emphasis on the present moment, links haiku strongly with the Buddhist ideal of suchness or *tathata*. This is also referred to as *sonomama* in colloquial Japanese. *Sonomama* refers to the “isness” of something and seeing things for the way they are and not bombarded by conceptualisations or abstractions which encourage us to see things for something they are not (Suzuki, 1970 p. 16).

Humility

Writing haiku is said to be a practise in humility (Reichold, 2003 p. 21). Contemporary poetry is often based on how the author feels or what they think, which can inflate the ego. Haiku, on the other hand, are based purely on real life observations.

Haiku also encourage the writer to learn that they are not the sole author of haiku; rather the haiku are bestowed upon the writer as gifts from nature (Reichold, 2003 p. 21). A haiku about an ant is as much a product of the ant itself as it is of the author. This encourages a sense of humility since authors cannot become egotistical about their work.

Conclusion

This has been an in-depth look at a unique and profound form of poetry, haiku. What appears to be simple is not, in fact, so simple and we should certainly not be fooled by their brevity. Haiku teach us a multitude of things including how to see the world around us in a different light. They teach us to look at plants and animals for what

they are and to marvel at the greatness and perfection in the ordinary world that we inhabit. By appreciating plants and animals for what they are and not as resources for the human race, as much of western culture does, we can begin to treat them with the respect and gentleness that they deserve. Only then will we be able to live in a world that appreciates and is kinder towards nature, instead of abusing it and destroying it. After all, it is not a case of “they are living in our world”, it is more a case of “we are all living together in this world and we have to share and care for it for the sake of all life”.

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