

A Preliminary Overview of Haiku Poetics in English

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and unique poetics of haiku in the English language. Originating from traditional Japanese haiku, which consists of 17 syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern, English haiku has undergone significant transformation since its introduction in the late 19th century. Through key historical events, the influence of literary movements such as Imagism, and the impact of Zen Buddhism, haiku has developed into a global literary genre. This study examines the structural, rhythmic, and imagistic elements of English haiku, highlighting its divergence from Japanese traditions while retaining core principles. The globalization and continued evolution of haiku suggest its enduring relevance and adaptability in diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: English haiku, Imagism, Zen Buddhism, poetics, globalization

1. Introduction

The haiku, a traditional Japanese poetic form, has had a profound impact on global literature, particularly in the English-speaking world. Originating from the first verse of renga¹ or linked-verse poetry. Among the pioneers of haiku, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) was a famous haikai poet of the early Edo period. He brought the haiku form to its peak and established a highly artistic style of haiku, known as “Shofu.”² He is the most famous haiku master in the

¹ a Japanese poem in the form of a tanka (or series of tanka), with the first three lines composed by one person and the second two by another.

² Basho wrote hokku (17-syllable opening verses for renga) as separate poems. This new style is called “shofu” or “Basho style.” Basho proclaimed what he called makoto no (“true”) haiku, seeking the spirit of this poetic form in sincerity and truthfulness. He also introduced a new beauty to haiku by using simple

history of Japanese literature. His haiku, characterized by simplicity, nature, seasonal words, and symbolism, had a profound influence on English haiku literature and many poets, including the Imagist leader Ezra Pound (1885-1972). His contributions also emphasized the importance of perceiving nature and the moment, which became a core feature of modern English haiku. But haiku was formalized as an independent genre actually by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) in the late 19th century, who is regarded as another major figure in the development of modern haiku poetry, credited with writing nearly 20,000 stanzas during his short life. Haiku traditionally consists of 17 kana (each kana is of one syllable) in a 5-7-5 pattern in which first line contains 5 syllables, second line, 7, and third line 5, and typically includes a seasonal word (kigo, indicating season) and a cutting word (kireji, usually as auxiliary words/verbs). This article explores the origins, evolution, and unique poetics of English-language haiku, highlighting significant historical milestones, structural elements, and the cultural exchanges that have shaped its development.

2. Origins of English Haiku

English haiku can trace its roots back to the early efforts of British diplomats and scholars in Japan. The first known translations of haiku into English were done by W.G. Aston (1841-1911), who included translations in his works *A Grammar of the Japanese Written Language* (1877) and *A Handbook of Colloquial Japanese* (1888). Other notable figures include Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935), who furthered the dissemination of haiku in English with his book *The Classical Poetry of the Japanese* (1880) which references the famous haiku by Kaga Chiyo: “朝顔に釣瓶取られて貰い水” (The morning glory/Climbs onto the

well-bucket./I borrow water!) (Zhang, 2019). This haiku, which once became a popular subject of study, is renowned for its vivid imagery and the subtle expression of human interaction with nature, capturing a simple yet profound moment in daily life.

The real breakthrough came in the early 20th century, when the Imagist movement, led by poets like Ezra Pound, recognized haiku's potential for conciseness and vivid imagery. Pound's haiku-like poem "In a Station of the Metro" (1913) is often cited as the first English-language haiku, despite its departure from the traditional 5-7-5 form:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.¹ (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 1297)

3. Key Historical Events: Dissemination and Development

The dissemination and development of haiku in the English-speaking world can be divided into several key phases:

1. Early Translations and Adaptations: The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the first wave of English translations of haiku. Scholars like Chamberlain and Aston played crucial roles in this process, although their translations often lacked the brevity and impact of the original Japanese.

2. Influence of Imagism: The Imagist movement in the early 20th century, with its emphasis on clear, precise imagery, found a natural affinity with haiku. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a prime example of how haiku influenced Western poetic forms. Although Pound did not adhere strictly to the 5-7-5 structure, his work captured the essence of haiku's conciseness and evocative imagery.

¹ Ferguson, M., Salter, M. J., Stallworthy, J. (2005). ed. The Norton Anthology of Poetry, W. W. Norton & Company. New York: 1297.

3. Post-War Proliferation: After World War II, haiku gained popularity in the United States, partly due to the influence of Zen Buddhism, which was popularized by figures like D. T. Suzuki¹. Reginald Blyth²'s seminal work, *Haiku* (1949-1952), introduced a Zen perspective to haiku interpretation, further cementing its place in Western literary traditions.

4. Institutionalization and Globalization: The establishment of organizations like the Haiku Society of America (1968) and the World Haiku Association (2000) marked the institutionalization of haiku in the West. These organizations played pivotal roles in standardizing haiku practices and fostering international haiku communities.

4. Poetics of English Haiku

The poetics of English haiku have evolved in response to the linguistic and cultural differences between English and Japanese. Key elements of haiku poetics include structure, seasonal references, rhythm, and imagery.

a. Structure: While traditional Japanese haiku adheres to a 5-7-5 syllabic structure, English haiku has adopted more flexible forms. Three-line structures are common, with variations such as 4-4-4 or 3-5-3 syllables. The three-line form is particularly effective in mirroring the 5-7-5 structure of Japanese haiku while accommodating the rhythmic and syntactic differences of English.

b. Seasonal References (Kigo): In Japanese haiku, kigo (seasonal words) are essential for conveying the time of year and evoking specific emotions. English haiku often include

¹ Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966) was a Japanese essayist, philosopher, religious scholar, translator, and writer. He was a scholar and author of books and essays on Buddhism, Zen and Shin that were instrumental in spreading interest in both Zen and Shin (and Far Eastern philosophy in general) to the West. Suzuki was also a prolific translator of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and Sanskrit literature. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1963.

² Reginald Horace Blyth (1898–1964) was an English writer and devotee of Japanese culture. He is most famous for his writings on Zen and on haiku poetry.

seasonal references, though these are more flexible and less codified. The emphasis remains on evoking a particular mood or setting that resonates with the reader.

c. Cutting Words (Kireji): In Japanese haiku, kireji serve as cutting words that provide a pause or a pivot within the poem. English haiku typically achieve this effect through punctuation, such as commas, colons, or dashes, which create a natural pause or shift in the poem's focus.

d. Imagery and Imagism: Haiku is inherently imagistic, using clear, concrete images to convey deep emotions or insights. This characteristic made haiku particularly appealing to the Imagists, who sought to strip poetry of superfluous words and focus on the precise rendering of images. In English haiku, the imagery often serves as a gateway to a larger philosophical or emotional reflection, echoing the Zen-inspired minimalism of Japanese haiku.

5. The Influence of Zen and Post-War Developments

Post-war haiku in the English-speaking world was heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, particularly through the works of Suzuki and Blyth. Zen's emphasis on simplicity, directness, and the present moment resonated with Western audiences, who were seeking new forms of spiritual and artistic expression in the aftermath of the war.

Blyth's interpretation of haiku as an expression of Zen philosophy led to a deeper appreciation of haiku's spiritual dimensions in the West. This period also saw the rise of the Beat Generation, with poets like Richard Wright (1908-1960) embracing haiku as a means of exploring existential themes and Zen concepts. Wright's later haiku, characterized by their adherence to the 5-7-5 form and inclusion of seasonal words, demonstrate the convergence of traditional haiku aesthetics with Western literary sensibilities.

6. Conclusion: The Globalization of Haiku

Over the past century, English-language haiku has undergone significant transformations, evolving from a translated form into a vibrant, global literary genre. The globalization of haiku is evidenced by the establishment of haiku societies and journals worldwide, as well as the continued publication of English-language haiku anthologies.

While English haiku has diverged from its Japanese roots in some respects, it remains deeply connected to the original form through its emphasis on brevity, imagery, and the evocation of nature. The ongoing evolution of haiku in the English-speaking world suggests that this poetic form will continue to inspire and challenge poets for generations to come.

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