

Haiku: The Definition

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Available in the past at :

http://www.kosukemiyata.com/bl/2breaths/9999/12/definition_of_haiku.html

Approaching haiku from a new direction, this article aims to provide a simple, clear and reliable definition of this poetic form.

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- 1. Two Breaths: The Live Rhythm of Haiku
 - 1.1. Breath-Lines and Rhythmical Parts

In 8th century Japan, verse was typically produced in "breath-lines", by simply adding one after another. Haiku, a descendant of such verse, consists of 1 full-length breath-line and less than a half. Below are the two basic constructions of haiku, set in breath-lines.

- a. Full + Short Construction (A figure, an example by Basho in transliteration and its translation)

OOOOO OOOOOOO
OOOOO

tabi-bito to waga na yobaren
hatsu shigure

"a traveller" will soon become my name;
first winter rain

- b. Short + Full Construction (A figure, an example by Basho in transliteration and its translation)

OOOOO
OOOOOOO OOOOO

hatsu shigure
saru mo komino wo hoshige nari

first winter rain—
even the monkey seems to want a straw coat

As shown in the figures above, there are 3 rhythmical parts in a haiku, the first and the last of which are of equal duration. Either the first two or the last two constitute a full breath-line and determine the construction.

When the first two rhythmical parts constitute a full breath-line, the rhythm inside widens, the

number of "O"s increasing. Likewise, when the last two constitute a full breath-line, the rhythm inside contracts, the number of "O"s decreasing.

O O O O O O O O O O O O
tabi-bito to waga na yobaren

O O O O O O O O O O O O
saru mo komino wo hoshige nari

This "O" is called mora by linguists, and moras (or morae) don't vary in duration as English syllables do. Since a mora is a timed unit, it's possible to use the more familiar term "beat" instead.

In the long + short construction (1.1.a.),
a haiku consists of [5+7] + [5] moras (beats)

in the short + long construction (1.1.b.),
a haiku consists of [5] + [7+5] moras (beats)

The increasing rhythm [5+7] feels grave, grand and wild, whereas the decreasing rhythm [7+5] sounds light, sophisticated and sometimes witty. The choice between these makes a big difference in haiku composition.

c. Polyrhythmic Construction (A figure, an example by Ryuta Iida in transliteration and its translation)

O O O O O O O O
O O O O O O O O O O

ichigatsu no kawa
ichigatsu no tani no naka

January's river—
in the valley of January

There are 2 breath-lines in a haiku. And there are 3 rhythmical parts too. What if, then, they didn't share a splitting-point? Above is what happens. The breath-lines split the second rhythmical part in two.

Despite the new rhythm produced by the breath-lines ([5+2] + [5+5]), the basic 3 rhythmical parts are still alive in this haiku. With the possessive particle "no" in "ichigatsu no" (January's), one expects a full-breath line ([5+7]) first, like

ichigatsu no kawa dadadadada
dadadadada

but the first breath-line ends before the end of the second rhythmical part. And "kawa" (river) falls between the first (expected) rhythmical break and the (actual) breath-line break:

ichigatsu no kawa
ichigatsu no tani no naka

The river in this haiku lies in a polyrhythmic valley. In other words, this haiku has the breath-lines as its frozen surface, and the underlying rhythmical parts as its still-running river. It's the latter element (the basic rhythm) that gives life to this thrilling innovation.

1.2. A Template for English-Language Haiku

For haiku composition in English, R. H. Blyth has put forth a dependable suggestion to go by accented syllables. Supplementing his template, the basic two constructions of haiku can be described as below:

a. Full & Short Construction

In the full & short construction,
a haiku in English may consist of
[2+3] + [2] accented syllables,
about [3 + 6] + [3] to [4 + 6] + [4] syllables in all

b. Short & Full Construction

in the short & full construction,
a haiku in English may consist of
[2] + [3+2] accented syllables,
about [3] + [6 + 3] to [4] + [6 + 4] syllables in all

However, you should always pay more attention to the actual (heard) duration than to the numbers mentioned above, since English syllables vary in duration and since an English word may contain a cluster of consonants.