

Master Bashô's Spirit

The following lesson introduces haiku from scratch, and by the end of it pupils are in a position to write good haiku of their own. It starts with stories of the 17th century Japanese poet Bashô, goes on to examine features of classic haiku and modern haiku, and culminates in the writing task.

The lesson is written as a self-study unit which you can follow to prepare yourself for the class. It is accompanied by suggestions for how to organise it as a class teaching session, so it doubles as a lesson-plan for use with your class (see Method below).

Timing

It is quite possible to teach the entire lesson, including discussing the pupils' choices of favourite poems, all around a class of thirty, and including writing and some redrafting of the writing, in an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half. Suggestions are appended at the end for follow-up work in a subsequent lesson.

The critical discussions of the haiku form, however, could take longer if you wish to cover thoroughly the issues raised in our Reference section (Form, Metaphor, Zen and Haiku *etc.*). In this case, you would divide the lesson into two or three classroom sessions.

Age-range

It is suitable for a wide age-range, from perhaps eleven or twelve years old up to University level and adult education, though clearly you will have to make appropriate adjustments for the age and ability levels of your students. If you teach younger children, see the following paragraph.

Method

1. Read through the self-study unit and do the tasks, so that you understand the material thoroughly.
2. Read more information on aspects of haiku, if you wish, by jumping to the articles in the Reference section, in order to be more fully informed when it comes to discussion of the poems in class.
3. Download the Photocopiable formatted Source Pages in the file at the end of the lesson, and photocopy sufficient numbers of each page for your students. You have our permission to copy copyright poems and translations for teaching purposes, but you may not re-publish copyright poems or translations without the express permission of the writers or their publishers.
4. Take your students through the stages of the lesson as shown in the self-study unit, leaving enough time at the end (about half an hour) for them each to write some haiku.
5. If you still have some time and energy left, go straight on to the Follow-ups (Re-drafting poems, displaying poems, performing poems). Otherwise, follow up in a subsequent lesson.

SELF-STUDY STUDENTS

Follow the instructions in the following lesson and work through the examples. The icons used to help guide you through the activities are:



READ



WRITE



THINK



CRITICAL REFLECTION

AIMS

In this first lesson you will be introduced to

- » what the haiku is and its special spirit
- » a number of examples by Japanese masters of the form and some Western ones
- » studying structural features of poems and making interpretative judgments about them, and
- » writing your first poems

By the end of the lesson, you should have written some of your own poems, and, more importantly, they should be poems that are truly in the spirit of haiku, not just seventeen-syllable thoughts or jokes.

This is master Bashô, the great Japanese poet who invented the haiku as we know it: a tiny poem filled with a love of nature. He spent his life close to nature. After a year in 1683 during which his hut burned down and his mother died, he took to the road. From the age of forty (in 1684) he travelled from place to place, like a tramp or wandering monk, walking through the countryside, living by teaching poetry in each town or village where he stopped.



His attitude to nature was humble, selfless, and deeply respectful. He said, "Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. In doing so, you must leave your preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one – when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there."

One of Bashô's fans, a poetry student, came to him and said, "I've got a great idea for a poem! It goes: 'Pull the wings off a dragonfly, and look - you get a red pepperpod!'"

Bashô said, "No. That is not in the spirit of haiku. You should write: 'Add wings to a pepperpod, and look - you get a red dragonfly!'"

Cruelty, violence and sensationalism have no place in haiku poetry. The natural processes of suffering and death do, but the attitude to creatures that suffer is compassionate.

Bashô had hundreds of keen students all over the country and some of them built him a little hut. In the front garden they planted a banana tree, which in Japanese is called a Bashô, and that is how he got his name. He is the poet of the banana-tree hut. Sitting in his little hut he wrote this poem:

Evening rain:
the basho
speaks of it first

Bashô went to visit the site of a famous battle, high on the moors, and found the place. There was nothing there, of course, except the hillside and tall moorland grasses, singed brown by the sun. He wrote this poem, which you can read first in Japanese, then in exact English word-equivalent, then in English poetic translations:

natsu-gusa ya / tsuwamono-domo-ga / yume no ato

summer grasses (!) / strong ones' / dreams' site

All that remains of
Those brave warriors' dreamings —
These summer grasses.

Summer grasses,
All that remains
Of soldiers' dreams
(trans. Stryk)

Count the syllables in the Japanese. It is in three sections – how many syllables are there in each? (A syllable is the smallest complete unit of sound in a word. To-day has two; to-mo-rrow has three; yes-ter-day has three; now has one).

Now count the syllables in each of the English translations. One matches the Japanese in line-length, and the other does not.

The Japanese syllable "ya" is a "cutting word." In these versions it is translated as an exclamation mark, or a dash, or a comma. It splits the poem into two sections.

Natsu-gusa, "summer grasses," is the season-word. A traditional haiku always had a season-word. Now you know the basic elements of the form: seventeen syllables, a "cut" or "break" splitting the poem into a one-line and a two-line unit (usually), and a season-word.



WRITE

Which translation do you prefer, the longer or the shorter? Give your reasons.



CRITICAL REFLECTION

Japanese haiku have seventeen syllables in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables. Some English translators stick to this same syllable pattern in English (as in our first example above), and this is called in English strict-form haiku. Many translators, however, feel free to use any short verse, usually shorter than seventeen syllables, and this is called free-form haiku. For more detail on formal approaches to the haiku in English, including arguments for seven-stresses, six-stresses, 3-4-3 or 4-5-4 syllable patterns, and four-liners, please see the articles on Form.



READ & STUDY

Bashô told his followers that the experience the poem was based on was more important than fancy or clever language. The poet should be absorbed in nature. The poet should not show off in the poem. He told them to aim for simplicity with elegance in expressing the "haiku moment," the truth of the original noticing.

Towards the end of his life he got a new idea: the style that made haiku poems "especially meaningful," he discovered, was *karumi*, or "lightness." Bashô had always liked subjects that were delicate and springy, like a blade of grass bouncing because an insect landed on it, and subjects that were "rising things," like smoke, skylarks, or

mountain paths. Here is one of his late poems on a light and springy subject, a very delicate movement:

Like stroking a boil
the touch of the tip
of the willow-branch

He tried to describe what he meant by the spirit of "lightness" applied to both the subject and the form of the poem. He said it should "give the impression of looking at a shallow river with a sandy bed." It is difficult to understand this, and he was disappointed that his followers did not seem to get the idea. At this point he was close to death, with little time left to teach them.

My way —
no-one on the road
and it's autumn, getting dark

His "Way of Poetry," the path he had chosen for his life, was an absolute commitment to seeking religious enlightenment through working at haiku, and he wanted his disciples to understand that the finest form of it had a spirit of "lightness."

Bashô died over 300 years ago, on the road, in a remote part of the country, in autumn. He lay ill with stomach pains for several days, and his admirers came from far and wide to see him. One of his disciples took down his last poem, which in Japanese tradition is important as the "death poem."

Ill on my journey —
dreams roam
parched moors

Bashô also dictated a different poem with similar imagery, but the disciple did not hear the first line and did not dare ask Bashô to repeat it, since he seemed too ill to speak without great pain, so it is now lost for ever. The haunting phrase of the two surviving lines is: "roaming still / my dreaming mind."

Bashô wrote a note to his brother: "I hope you will complete your full life in peace and calm. There is nothing more I have to say."

On his last day he slept all morning, woke at noon, and showed his characteristic amused sympathy with little creatures: "Those flies seem delighted to have a sick man around," he said. In the afternoon he clasped his hands and murmured religious verses from Buddhist sutras, and died.



READ



THINK

Read the following selection of haiku and choose two or three that particularly appeal to you. Note down what the qualities are that you like about them.

The first section poems are by Bashô. Note that each has a word letting you know which time of year it is (sun-scorched grass, petals, chestnuts, crickets, the harvest moon etc. – each is associated with a particular season).

These are followed by a section of haiku by Issa, a gentle, soft-hearted haiku master who lived a hundred years after Bashô, from 1763 to 1827. He also expressed great sympathy with all aspects of nature and showed in abundance the Spirit of Master Bashô.

Then there is a mixed section of Japanese haiku, English haiku and haiku by children. Choose your favourites from any section.

Note for teachers:

The task for the students, when you have covered the introduction above, is to read all the poems, to select one or two favourites each (one if you have a large number of students in the class, two if you have fewer) and be prepared to say what appeals about them. Download the formatted photocopyable Source Pages for distributing the poems to the class.

After allowing a reasonable time for the reading and selection (10-15 minutes), go round the class taking each student's choice in turn and discussing briefly the qualities of each chosen poem. This might take 30-40 minutes with a large class of thirty students choosing one poem each. It could take longer, of course, if you decide to dwell on this critical aspect of the lesson and draw upon the critical information in the Reference Section articles. See the Critical Reflection section after the selection of poems for information about some of the issues which will arise in discussing the poems.

An inch or two
above dead grasses
heat waves
(Bashô)

The petals tremble
on the yellow mountain rose –
roar of the rapids
(Bashô)

I'll take these back
for the city slickers —
sour chestnuts
(Bashô)

My way —
no-one on the road
and it's autumn, getting dark
(Bashô)

A terrible sound —
the gilded helmet's
trapped cricket
(Bashô)

In the moonlight a worm
silently
drills through a chestnut
(Bashô)

With what kind of voice
would the spider cry
in the autumn wind?
(Bashô)

The shallows —
a crane's thighs splashed
in cool waves
(Bashô)

A dragonfly, trying to —
oops, hang on to the upside
of a blade of grass
(Bashô)

Deep into autumn
and this caterpillar
still not a butterfly
(Bashô)

Watching for snow,
the boozers' faces —
a flash of lightning
(Bashô)

All my friends
viewing the moon —
an ugly bunch
(Bashô)

(Moon-viewing has always been a popular Japanese pastime at the time of the harvest moon in September)

Winter gusts
strop the crag
through a gap in the cedars
(Bashô)

Like stroking a boil
the touch of the tip
of the willow-branch
(Bashô)

Ice in the night —
the water jar cracks,
waking me
(Bashô)

Issa

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One bath
after another —
how stupid!
(Issa)

Thirty p each:
a cup of tea,
and a singing bird
(Issa)

From the bough
floating downriver,
insect song.
(Issa)

The puppy too
they pelt with snowballs
till he scampers off!
(Issa)

Once in the box
every one of them is equal —
the chess pieces
(Issa)

Silverfish escaping —
mothers,
fathers, children
(Issa)

Sprawled like an X —
carefree,
how lonely
(Issa)

House burnt down —
fleas
dance in embers
(Issa)

My old home —
wherever I touch,
thorns
(Issa)

My empty face,
betrayed
by lightning
(Issa)

Snail — baring
shoulders
to the moon
(Issa)

Bright moon,
welcome to my hut —
such as it is
(Issa)

Haiku by other writers

Are there
short-cuts in the sky,
summer moon?
(Lady Sute Jo, trans. Stryk)

How long the day:
the boat is talking
with the shore
(Shiki)

Fields and mountains
all taken by snow —
nothing remains
(Jôsô)

The skylark:
Its voice alone fell,
leaving nothing behind
(Ampu)

Asleep or awake
the night is long —
the sound of rapids
(Santôka, translated Stevens)

Wet with morning dew
I go
in any direction I want
(Santôka, translated Stevens)

The thief left it behind —
the moon
at the window
(Ryôkan, translated Stevens)

The wind has brought
enough leaves
to make a fire
(Ryôkan, translated Stevens)

Spring rain —
everything becomes
more lovely
(Lady Chiyo-ni)

Shelling peas —
hard rain falling
on the chimney cowl
(Maggie West)

In the Rose Garden
a man I don't much like
enjoying the sun
(George Marsh)

Do this! Do that!
Spring cleaning
Mom's in a bad mood
(Matt Hunt, age 11)

Scooping up water —
the moon in my hands, I pick up
nothing at all
(Sirintip Pumson, age 11)

By the flare
of each rocket
I see my friend
(Misato Hirashita, age 12)

Snowflakes falling
watching from my window
sipping hot chocolate
(Emily Wiseman, age 9)

Drawing a house
with a fenced-in yard
the deaf boy
(Francine Porad)

Five mince pies
in tissue paper —
no message, no name
(Ransetsu)

In a passing car
just time to see
the batsman, out
(Jackie Hardy)

It's no use mouthing
O after O at me —
I don't speak goldfish!
(David Cobb)

Birthday dinner —
lid of the ricepot
bubbling over
(David Cobb)

Children panicking
out of the tiger cage
a wasp
(David Cobb)

Coming down
through lark-song, my daughter
on a parachute
(David Cobb)

Minding the robots
technicians shift their weight
from foot to foot
(David Cobb)

Close circuit TV:
watching myself going
the other way
(David Cobb)

A scarecrow in church —
how wide the pleading arms,
how stiff the knees!
(David Cobb)

The spiritualist
his dog snapping
at unseen flies
(Brian Tasker)

Embers die
the chair where the friend sat
fills with moonlight
(Cicely Hill)

Down the chimney
First a pigeon's cooing
then a crust of bread
(Cicely Hill)

Under forest trees
gold globes of horse dung steaming
in the frosty air
(Cicely Hill)

The scarecrow in the distance;
it walked with me
as I walked
(San-in)

The blade of grass
sits waving in the wind
with millions surrounding it
(Tony, age 12)

Wayne runs down the wing
with deep thoughts of Wembley
crash – he's tackled again
(David, age 11)

Trees waving in the wind
rain thunders down
trees loosen their roots
(Emma, age 7)

The big willow waved
washing away the breeze
leaving fresh branches
(Jason, age 11)

Hard rain reveals
in the garden mud
glints of sharp glass
(Connaire Kensit)

Waves crash
against fortifications
dead of night
(Michael Gunton)

Behind a lone tree
on the mountain ridge
immense clouds moving
(Michael Gunton)

In the forest
a man shouting
day after day
(Michael Gunton)

In spring sunshine
its face worn away
the sandstone saint
(Michael Gunton)

Just echoing boards
this empty house
where we laughed and cried
(Jim Norton)

Dare I tell him?
From my neighbour's dung-yard
a double rainbow
(Jim Norton)

Beyond the crossroads
deep into autumn
the hillroad disappears
(Jim Norton)

Each morning in spring
the birds and the toaster
doing their stuff
(Koji)

Winter starlings —
a hundred-bird silence
over my head
(Koji)

The yellowed leaves
are the feelings of the tree
falling away
(Koji)

In the park
a man and his boomerang
all over the place
(Brian Tasker)



REFLECT

There are a thousand things to say about these poems, but let me just highlight some themes and point you in the direction of further reading. (Teachers: familiarise yourselves with these points before leading the discussion of poems with your class.)

Beauty

The Spirit of Master Bashô was humble and simple, so there are a lot of humble and simple subjects. The sort of poverty embraced by a monk or wandering poet with no possessions is celebrated, as is the simple life of fleas and flies and so on.

Everything in haiku is in the present. You might get reference to a memory or a dream, but the poem is always firmly based in an immediate experience and written in the present tense. The poems do not cover a wide time-span. They happen in an instant, which is now. You must not try and write one which tells us about planting the bulbs, and then seeing the hyacinths weeks later!

There are traditional moods and flavours to haiku: loneliness often colours a poem, and not always with misery; grateful acceptance is a traditional Buddhist attitude; and Bashô emphasised delight in simple things. The poem may be a description of a natural scene, but have a strong associated feeling.

The haiku that are considered the most beautiful have images that have hit upon universal oppositions: something in movement and something still; something massive and something delicate; something natural and something man made; rising things and falling things; a living thing and an inanimate one; warmth and chill; something clear and something hazy. Or they might put together more subtle combinations that are beautiful in their contrast: a sound and a smell; a feeling and an object; loneliness in company. Look for these lovely qualities.

Zen Buddhism

There is a strong association between Zen Buddhism and haiku. Bashô studied Zen, and sometimes dressed as a Zen priest, with his head shaved. Issa lived for several years in monasteries and took his name from the Buddhist ideas of emptiness and change. Bashô insisted that a life dedicated to haiku poetry was a "Way" to enlightenment.

The words to watch out for in haiku poems, which are associated with Zen practice, are:-

- » words referring to sitting, or balancing or perching (meditation is done sitting balanced on a cushion);
- » the words for emptiness, the void, nothing, silence, stillness etc. (referring to the state of mind achieved in meditation and the nature of the ultimate reality perceived through meditation);

» words for awakening, waking up etc. (referring to enlightenment, the great insight into the nature of reality);
» and words such as the way, the path, the road which refer to the religious life or the practice of a particular art in a religious spirit.
(For a more substantial discussion of this subject, click on Zen and Haiku).

Form

You will see that most of the writers or translators have opted for an English haiku form of less than seventeen syllables. If you count stresses, or accents, you will find that most of them have six stresses, quite a few have five. And the modern writers follow the Japanese classics in using a season-word most of the time, but not always.

The important thing is keeping to Master Bashô's Spirit.

Funny haiku, more about human affairs than nature, are called senryu. There is a separate senryu tradition in Japan. We have only given you a few examples here, by Jackie Hardy, David Cobb and Brian Tasker, because we want to keep the emphasis on Master Bashô's serious Spirit.

You will find One-Image poems and Two-Image poems. In the Two-Image ones, there is an interesting relationship between the two elements, worth talking about.

All these topics are covered at greater length in the REFERENCE SECTION.



WRITE

Now write some haiku. You know enough now to get launched. Some suggestions:

- » Write about some perception that has stuck in your memory as a vivid picture or a significant moment associated with a particular place.
- » Go for a walk and observe the weather, the trees, the birds and anything else. Do it by yourself, with serious attention, taking care to look closely in the spirit of Master Bashô. Make notes.
- » Look at familiar little things through a magnifying glass: the movement of an insect or worm, earth, wood, the skin of your hand etc.
- » Write a haiku structured on two smells, two sounds, or any combination of two sense impressions.
- » See if you get an idea about a contrast of big and small, rising and falling, delicate and unyielding etc. – but don't try too hard! If it is not based on an observation or experience it will sound contrived.

Don't write about an idea or a thought. Don't use any abstract nouns. Keep it simple and concrete. Stick to accurate observations. You may use seventeen syllables

exactly, or, as in many of the examples quoted in this lesson, fewer than seventeen syllables. Have fun!



REFLECT

Now share your haiku with some readers and ask them what they see. If they are confused, or see something quite different to what was in your mind, you need to revise the poem to achieve the effect you seek. If they respond enthusiastically, you have got an early hit!

Teachers

Immediately after discussing the poems provided, set your students to write. In twenty minutes they may well produce three or four new poems. Make sure you leave enough time (five minutes) to share at least one from every student before the end of your teaching session, by reading them aloud.

For Follow-up Lessons do:

- » a haiku-walk (known in Japan as a ginko): a rubbish tip can be as good as a beauty spot, but make sure that students are looking closely, touching things, listening and smelling, noting details, thinking of comparisons, looking at the sky as well as the ground and stretching their language.
- » re-drafting workshops – study the Show Don't Tell lesson on this website for the principles to apply to re-drafting.
- » display: Haiku lend themselves very well to visual display work with the younger children, accompanied by drawings or elaborately illuminated initial letters.
- » performances: prepare performances for audiences of other classes, parents or other outside groups; haiku need longish pauses between poems; they respond very well to percussion accompaniment, perhaps with the addition of one or two simple haunting notes on a pipe or organ; if you have the skills in drama and dance, they also lend themselves to movement work very effectively.
- » work on parts of speech and literary language, especially in relation to translation and style (see follow up in Show Don't Tell).

And click [here](#) for more alternative starting points for haiku writing.

CONCLUSION

You have now

- » learned what the haiku is and about its special spirit,

- » read a number of examples by Japanese masters of the form and some Western ones;
- » studied some of the internal structure of poems, made interpretative judgments about them and
- » written your first poems.

Congratulations.

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