

## Seasoning Your Haiku

by Ferris Gilli

We all know at least one definition of haiku, and most of us claim a personal definition that allows for our individual perceptions of haiku. The definition that I support posits, among other things, that haiku are traditionally very short poems about nature and/or man's relationship with nature (often subtly revealing human nature), and typically contain a kigo. (Humans are a part of nature, no matter how unnatural and aberrant some appear.

However, ideally, a haiku should not be overbalanced with human reference.)

A kigo is a word or phrase in a haiku that indicates season. It lets readers know in which season the haiku is happening. Traditionally, "season" is an essential element of haiku. Conveniently for haiku poets, many, if not most kigo come from nature, so that when a nature kigo is used in a poem, two haiku elements are immediately satisfied. Some kigo come from humanity, such as holidays; some are human activities that routinely occur in certain seasons, like preserving fruit and flying a kite.

Kigo do more than indicate seasons. Just as certain images and events reflect a seasonal feel, they can also reflect an emotion, mood, or time of life. For example, spring and the images and events of spring (nesting, newborn animals, plant buds, longer days, etc.) suggest hope, new beginnings, and the joy of life. For autumn and winter the images and events (longer nights, falling leaves, bare trees, departing geese, cold earth, etc.) may suggest the end of something, old age, dying, a time for rest, and so on. On the other hand, certain autumnal images – such as walking briskly on a cool, crisp morning, children's cheeks made rosy by autumn air, crunchy red apples, leaf viewing, bright pumpkins, and autumn flowers might suggest

different moods: a new burst of energy, appreciation of nature's beauty, abundance of nature's gifts, and so on. Skilled poets who are concerned with Japanese tradition carefully consider the kigo and its connotations as they write each haiku. Haiku poets may refer to a Japanese kiyose (collection of season terms) or a more comprehensive saijiki (which includes season terms accompanied by haiku examples of how to use them); or drawing on our own experiences in our respective locales, we may use words and phrases that indicate season. Some internet resources include:

- *The Five Hundred Essential Japanese Season Words*, selected by Kenkichi Yamamoto; translated by Kris Young Kondo and William J. Higginson; edited for [Renku Home](#) with added information on the seasonal system by William J. Higginson. Here you can not only look up kigo, but also propose an addition to a new season word list.
- [A Dictionary of Haiku](#) – Classified by Season Words with Traditional and Modern Methods by Jane Reichhold.
- [The World Kigo Database](#) is compiled by Gabi Greve that welcomes contributions.

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Most haiku poets consider a kiyose or saijiki to be indispensable. It is almost impossible to write a successful renku without one, or at least without having memorized a great many kigo, including which part of the season each represents. I urge writers to have access to at least one source of established kigo; however, one *can* write haiku without it. An alert and season-sensitive poet does not have to rely on a published list of season words to write haiku. It is worth noting, however, that if you write haiku without ever consulting a kiyose, you may occasionally run into problems when submitting your work to haiku journals.

No matter how many kiyose or saijiki we may own or have access to, no matter where we live, this is the bottom line: While doing our best to honour Japanese tradition, we should honour our own seasonal perceptions. Often

we must rely on our common sense, as we consider our locations in the world, and at times we might be wise to consider the seasonal perception of the readers for whom we write.

We should not become so worried with the precise “correctness” of kigo topics in our haiku and in the work of others that we neglect to appreciate other vital elements. I have on occasion watched Western students of haiku worry themselves into tight corners from which they find it difficult to escape to the freedom of creativity – that is, creativity unhampered by incessant “hair splitting” in the matter of kigo.

Just about everywhere, seasons blend and fluctuate. Also, many topics that indicate specific seasons in the kiyose may occur at a different time of year, or all year, in some locales. While “rainbow” may be a summer kigo in the kiyose, we know perfectly well that a rainbow can appear at any time of year in many, if not most places. In fact, “winter rainbow” is a winter kigo in the kiyose.

“Lizard” is a summer kigo; but in central and south Florida, “anole” (a type of lizard) is an all-year kigo. The little diurnal anoles are always with us. The nocturnal albino geckos, however, disappear with cool weather, and don’t reappear until the warmer nights of spring.

Topics may get their seasonal placements in a kiyose because they are more strongly indicative of their respective season than the other seasons.

“Ploughing” is a spring kigo, for obvious reasons. Even though ploughing is done at other times of the year, depending on locale, as when preparing the soil for an autumn garden or to plant winter wheat, ploughing is more universally thought of as being done in the spring – so far at least, in the

views of those who write the kiyose.

Poets are bound to disagree with some topic placements in the kiyose depending on where we are in the world. All my life, falling leaves and coloured leaves have indicated autumn to me. We go north for the “autumn leaf viewing”, because the leaves are so colourful. But in the kiyose, “coloured leaves fall” is a winter kigo. “Watermelon” is an autumn kigo, yet it is a summer kigo down in the Southern US, where many people look forward to summer when they can enjoy cool slices of fresh watermelon. I don’t like to use “watermelon” as an autumn kigo. “Cantaloupe” by extension may also be an autumn kigo, and yet in my experience, the season for eating them here in central Florida begins in summer, and the best cantaloupes are gone by autumn.

You should also know that every season word in the kiyose does not necessarily correspond to the time of year it indicates. By using some season words with different modifiers, different seasons may be indicated according to modifier. For example, moon (by itself), new moon, and harvest moon are autumn kigo; hazy moon is a spring kigo. To break it down even further, hazy moon is all spring, moon (by itself) is all autumn, moon-viewing, new moon, and harvest moon are mid-autumn. Many season words that have been borrowed from different countries are found in a modern Japanese kiyose. We are a diverse group of writers, from all over the world. I believe that if we force ourselves to rigidly adhere to one collection of season words created for the poets of one part of the world, we will miss a valuable opportunity to pay homage to and explore our diversity. It is important to honour Japanese tradition, and I believe we can do this in Western haiku if we use our common sense and find a balance.

Poets who are concerned with being published have to respect editors' guidelines for kigo. I believe that most editors are at least concerned with a "seasonal feel" in the haiku they publish, even if they do not insist on a kiyose-derived kigo for every poem. Most of the editors with whom I am acquainted are very aware of the seasonal placement of topics in established Japanese kiyose. They notice when a haiku contains conflicting or glaringly incorrect kigo, and a poem with that problem will likely be returned, with or without suggestions for revision. If you use an image out of season according to the kiyose, be sure that you know *why* you are doing that. Even if you adhere to an established, well-known kiyose, you may occasionally hit a wall. Editors are human, and have their own personal views and tastes. One may reject a haiku that takes place in autumn if it contains a butterfly; it may be that butterfly imagery automatically makes him or her think of spring; this editor may perceive "butterfly", when found in an otherwise autumn haiku, as confusing and conflicting for readers. Yet, "autumn butterfly" is a topic directly from widely read collections of established season words! But if for your editor, "butterfly" is synonymous with spring, then you will have to respect that in the haiku that you submit to him or her.

You may run also into questions when you use a kigo that you know to be correct, but the specific topic does not appear in any well-known kiyose. For example, we know that courting animals, nest building, and so on, are spring topics, and rightly so. Yet, it is a fact that some ducks begin their courting in winter, so that by the time it is spring, they will have *already* chosen their mates and nest building can begin. Unless your editor is very knowledgeable about wood ducks, you may have a hard time convincing him or her that "courting wood ducks" is a late winter topic. And again, like the editor who

prefers to save butterflies for spring, this one, even after learning the habits of wood ducks, may feel that readers regard mating birds as indications of spring; and therefore that to suggest otherwise would cause such a conflict that readers would be distracted.

Can a poem that fulfils the basic criteria for haiku, but lacks a kigo, be considered a haiku? Why not ask as well, "Can a poem that fulfils the basic criteria for haiku, but lacks a reference to nature, be considered a haiku"? In each case of course, it depends on the author's and/or the reader's definition of haiku, and on how rigidly we wish to adhere to the definition. Surely there are exceptions to the "rules". We are free to decide for ourselves, perhaps poem-by-poem.

Ideally, a haiku should contain nature and seasonal reference. While I consider humans to be part of nature, for haiku purposes I tend to separate humans from the "natural" world of living things and the outdoors, and I don't rely on human reference to supply the nature part of my haiku. Another way of putting it is that I try to feature or at least include imagery that is NOT to do with the top of the food chain. But in my opinion, if enough essential elements are present otherwise, a poem that features only humanity and includes neither the "natural" world nor a seasonal reference can still be a haiku.

**\*\*Editor's note:** Ferris Gilli is a well-known American writer of haiku and its related forms. She is an editor for [The Heron's Nest](#) and has also been haiku editor for *Treetops* (World Haiku Review). Her 12-lesson haiku guide *Exploring Haiku* was translated into Romanian and is being used in the Romanian school system. Ferris lives in Marietta, Georgia, in the United States.