

Haiku

Haiku is a traditional poetry form from Japan. There are many different types of Haiku, but the most common have these things in common:

1. They must be only three lines long, and each line must have a certain number of syllables. In many, the first line has 5 syllables, the second line has 7 syllables, and the third line has 5 syllables. Other patterns are: 3,5,5 or 4,5,4, or 4,5,5.
2. They are often about some part of nature, must have a "kigo"- a seasonal word, to show in what season the poem is set.

The purpose of a Haiku is to observe a moment in time and share that moment- the sight and the feel of it. You only have three lines to make your reader share your experience, so your words need to pack a lot of power- choose them carefully. You want to avoid telling a story, and instead create a single image that is sharp, like a photograph. These images can be beautiful, funny, serious- whatever you as the poet want to share.

Here are some examples of Haiku. As you read, think about what the poet wants you to see and hear. Also, how do you feel? Are any of these Haiku funny? What is the pattern of syllables each poet is using? Can you find the "kigo" in each poem? Does each poem have one?

The first three are from Japanese master Matsuo Basho. They may not fit exactly the pattern of syllables in English, because they were written first in Japanese.

Old pond
A frog leaps in
Water's sound

On a bare branch
A crow has settled
Autumn dusk

The lightning flashes!
And slashing through the darkness
A night-heron's screech.

Haiku have become very popular in America, as well. These next four were written by American poets.

Freezing wind-
the body builder pumps gas
in a muscle shirt
-Billie Wilson

Werewolf movie
at the commercial
letting the dog out
-W.F. Owen

In the sun
the butterfly wings
like a church window
-Jack Kerouac

The summer chair
rocking by itself
in the blizzard
-Jack Kerouac

Can you try to write a Haiku of your own? Pick a pattern of syllables that you would like to try. Do you remember a time when you were paying special attention to the things around you? Maybe you were climbing a tree, or caught outside in a thunderstorm, or playing basketball outside on the hottest day all summer. What did it look like? Sound like? Can you make the reader feel what it was like to be there?