

HYPHENATED WORDS IN HAIKU

Brad Bennett

English-language haiku sometimes include punctuation, and when they do, they're typically punctuated with ellipses and em dashes that serve as cuts. But what about hyphens, those quiet, unassuming marks, smaller even than dashes, often buried within longer words? We rarely think about hyphens when we're writing our poetry or prose. What do they bring to the table?

Hyphens are usually used to join words to indicate a combined meaning. We often find hyphens in compound words, and sometimes need to consult a dictionary to find out if they are necessary. Thus, hyphens are typically used as technical necessities in certain words, not as collaborators in the process of creating meaning in the poem itself. Do hyphens ever add semantic value to a haiku?

A few years ago, I came upon a haiku that nudged me to think more deeply about the role of hyphenated words in our poems:

jasmine
spilling over the stone wall
a come-back-here hug

*Chuck Brickley*¹

I was particularly struck by Brickley's invention of a new adjective, "come-back-here," and how it added freshness, feeling, and *karumi* to the haiku. Also, the hyphenated word speeds up the last line, perhaps stressing the urgency of the emotion it generates. Brickley's poem directly inspired this haiku:

sunlit moss
a sit-awhile bench
in the silver maples

*Brad Bennett*²

This was the first time that I had deliberately tried to create a hyphenated word to use in a haiku. Prior to that, hyphenated words would come to me every now and then during my writing practice, but hyphenating was not a recognized tool in my haiku toolbox. Those two poems inspired me to search for more successful examples by others, and to continue to experiment with creating newly-hyphenated words in my haiku.

When I began gathering haiku examples with hyphens, I intended to highlight only poems that utilized words that were hyphenated in new ways, as in Brickley's haiku above. But the more I studied the examples that I was collecting, the more I realized that hyphens can contribute to the meaning of a haiku in ways that I had never considered. In this essay, I will be examining haiku containing hyphenated words in which the hyphen makes a noticeable semantic contribution to the whole poem. I found that the meaning of a haiku may be enhanced in different ways: the freshness of a newly-coined hyphenated word, the connecting, lengthening, or partitioning that the hyphen creates, the pace or cadence created by the hyphenated word or words, and the concrete or visual aspect of the hyphen itself. These effects are subtle, and may operate primarily on an intuitive level, but nonetheless can add to the haiku's content.

Let's first take a look at haiku that include examples of what initially attracted me to these tiny punctuation marks: newly-coined hyphenated words. Many haiku include common, hyphenated words that work well for the poem, because they describe an aspect of the haiku moment, but they don't provide any added semantic benefit. For instance, while the word "know-how" fits perfectly in the following intriguing and well-constructed haiku, I would argue that the hyphen itself doesn't add anything to the meaning of the poem.

the know-how
of nowhere
tundra wind

Jonathan Humphrey ³

In contrast, some haiku include invented hyphenated words that con-

tribute to the overall meaning of the poem. Creating new hyphenated words is a fun way to inject freshness into a haiku. They can also infuse our haiku with *karumi* or humor. In addition, hyphenated words often sound more colloquial, a trait valued in haiku since Bashō's time. The newly-coined word is often a noun, as in these three examples:

as-it-is-ness melts upon naming <i>Sondra J. Byrnes</i>⁴	tumbling woodpile the chatter-chase of young wrens <i>Brad Bennett</i>⁵
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deep snow the turkey's glide-sink glide-sink
*Mary Stevens*⁶

The newly-coined word can also serve as an adjective in the form of a "compound modifier." This might be the most common use of hyphens in haiku. "A compound modifier is made up of two or more words that work together to function like one adjective in describing a noun."⁷ The compound modifier is usually placed before the noun. (If the words came after the noun, they would typically not be hyphenated.)

walking the wrack line mile-apart strangers
*Peter Newton*⁸

daylight moon
the slicked-down reeds
of a muskrat slide
*Cherrie Hunter Day*⁹

As noted above, hyphenated words can be considered examples of colloquial language. Some hyphenated words are comprised of common phrases or idioms that are connected by hyphens. In Davis' haiku below, the hyphenated word acts as a pivot. In one reading, "day-to-day" is an adverbial phrase modifying the verb "living," and, in another, "day-to-day" is an adjective modifying the noun "lilies."

living day-to-day lilies

*Pat Davis*¹⁰

By definition, hyphens are used to join words or parts of words. Sometimes, hyphens connect smaller parts into a larger whole. In the first haiku below, the hyphen serves to connect “nest” and “building,” much like sticks interwoven to create a nest. In addition, the hyphen itself looks stick-like. Hyphens can also be used to join two opposing tendencies, perhaps creating an intriguing tension. In the second haiku, the hyphens in the first line help to emphasize the opposite choices of a well-known cultural ritual, and the hyphen in the third line highlights the juxtaposition of two work shifts and, perhaps, day and night as well.

nest-building
an eagle returns a branch
to the cedar

*Christopher Herold*¹¹

trick-or-treat
the darkened houses
of second-shift workers

*paul m.*¹²

When you hyphenate, you obviously create a longer word. Sometimes, that longer word mimics an extension that is a part of the haiku moment. In Caruso’s haiku below, the word “tippy-toes” is longer than just “toes,” and thus helps to emphasize the extended reach of the person in the poem. The longer hyphenated word can also help stress an act of doubling in the poem. In Skanne’s haiku, “double-note” is a two-word word, adding resonance to the poem, and helping to highlight the double-note of the two words on the first line and, of course, the call of a kingfisher.

spring moon
her tippy-toes bring her
that much closer

*David Caruso*¹³

frost fog
the clear double-note
of a kingfisher

*Caroline Skanne*¹⁴

Ironically, while hyphenating is an act of joining, it can also serve to call attention to smaller pieces inside the larger word. Hyphens can accentu-

ate a splitting or partitioning that is part of the haiku moment. In the first example below, the hyphen in “mid-fall” splits the season of fall in half, like we might split an apple. In the second haiku, “self” and “talk” are separated by a hyphen, perhaps alluding to the yin-yang-ness of light and shadow, our inner and outer selves, and the light and dark sides of the moon. Sometimes, a hyphen helps to create deliberate enjambment, splitting up a line or even a word, as in the third poem.

mid-fall
she splits an apple
into stars

*Pippa Phillips*¹⁵

self-talk
how shadow
shapes the moon

*Joyce Clement*¹⁶

the elevator dings
my like-
ness splits in two

*Brad Bennett*¹⁷

Typically, hyphenated words are read at a quicker pace. In the following poem, “rain-dark” would be read more quickly than “rain dark,” thus quickening the processes of twilight and the synesthetic shift from visual to olfactory experience.

twilight
rain-dark buds
becoming scent

*Peggy Willis Lyles*¹⁸

Hyphenated words can also help create a specific cadence in a haiku, as in the poems below. In Makino’s poem, “saw-whet” and “one-note” connect to each other and help create cadence. Notice the intriguing irony of the word “one-note” being comprised of two beats. In Lilly’s poem, the last line recreates the rhythmic pulse of a respirator. The writer can also use hyphenated words to create a stuttering effect, as in Cooper’s poem.

writer's block
the saw-whet owl's
one-note tune

*Annette Makino*¹⁹

The respirator sounds
from the next room —
cloud-muffled moon-glow

*Rebecca Lilly*²⁰

warbler trills
the near-steady steps
of a piebald fawn

*Bill Cooper*²¹

A hyphen is a visual symbol, and hence can act as a visual manifestation of an aspect of the haiku's theme. In the following poems, hyphens portray rails in a split-rail fence, the white stripe on a pheasant's neck, and a stretch of worm being tugged by a robin.

pastureland
the keep-these-in keep-those-out
split-rail fence

*Alan S. Bridges*²²

my heart
in my throat
ring-necked pheasant

*Jeff Hoagland*²³

rain-soaked earth
a robin tugs one end
of the universe

*Julie Schwerin*²⁴

What happens when you use more than one hyphenated word in a haiku? Just as a hyphen joins two words, two hyphenated words in the same haiku invite relationships as well. The words are linked by the presence of hyphens, but they are also obviously different in meaning. Hence, multiple hyphens may help to create a link and shift inside the haiku. In the haiku below, "mid-sentence" and "stone-shadow" are necessarily linked by the hyphens they contain, therefore urging readers to consider how they relate. The reader gets to ponder the relationships between silence and noise, shadow and light, and stone and snow.

the silence
mid-sentence —
stone-shadow snow

*Alan Peat*²⁵

Of course, hyphens can serve multiple roles in a haiku. For instance, in the following monoku, the two hyphenated words are both examples of compound modifiers. They also speed up the reading of the poem. And the hyphens themselves mimic the scars a shovel might make on new potatoes, hence providing a concrete element.

shovel-scarred freshly-dug day moon

*Brad Bennett*²⁶

Yes, punctuation is perhaps one of the least important elements in our haiku. And yes, the hyphen is one of the least impactful punctuation marks. But haiku's concision requires us to consider each and every character carefully. While hyphens rarely play starring roles in haiku, they often act solidly in supporting roles. In subtle ways, they can provide additional semantic value or accentuate part of the haiku moment. The examples in this essay gave me a new appreciation for the small but helpful part that hyphens play in our haiku.

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NOTES

- ¹ *Frogpond* 45:1.
- ² Third Place, "The 2022 Peggy Willis Lyles Awards" at *The Heron's Nest*.
- ³ *The Heron's Nest* 22:1.
- ⁴ *Sonic Boom* 22.
- ⁵ *Modern Haiku* 54:3.
- ⁶ *Whiptail* 2.
- ⁷ "How to Use a Hyphen Correctly" at grammarly.com.
- ⁸ Newton, Peter. *Glide Path*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2022.
- ⁹ *The Heron's Nest* 16:4.
- ¹⁰ *Akitsu Quarterly*, Winter 2019.
- ¹¹ *The Heron's Nest* 23:2.
- ¹² *Acorn* 50.
- ¹³ *The Heron's Nest* 14:1.
- ¹⁴ *Presence* 66.
- ¹⁵ *Frogpond* 44:3.
- ¹⁶ *Frogpond* 45:2.
- ¹⁷ *Prune Juice* 12.
- ¹⁸ *Frogpond* 21:1.
- ¹⁹ *Modern Haiku* 51:1.
- ²⁰ *Modern Haiku* 49:3.
- ²¹ Cooper, Bill. *Rounded by the Sea*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2022.
- ²² *Modern Haiku* 54:3.
- ²³ Hoagland, Jeff. *Scent of Juniper*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2023.
- ²⁴ *Frogpond* 43:3.
- ²⁵ *Frogpond* 45:2.
- ²⁶ *Whiptail* 5.