
ESSAYS

HAIKU STANCES

Michael Dylan Welch

Ask five people on the street if they know what a haiku is and they'll most likely say it's a kind of poem. Let's hope they know at least that. We could therefore assume that one writes haiku for poetic purposes, whatever that might mean, but I don't think it's that simple. I suspect there are as many reasons for writing haiku as there are people, but perhaps the following five motivations are the most common. Each reason for writing haiku offers differing rewards, and I believe we can better appreciate another person's haiku (and also senryu) if we also understand where they're coming from, and whether they might be writing from one or more of the following stances, or perhaps another stance altogether.

The most basic or primal reason for writing haiku is RECREATIONAL—to have fun. Such writers may have no interest in literary techniques or the entwined traditions of Japanese precedent. Haiku might even be a brief or temporary diversion that they try once every five or ten years and then abandon, perhaps like going bowling once every long while. These people are not going to own their own bowling shoes, so to speak. They may think of haiku merely as a syllable-counting exercise, akin to the limerick as a sort of joke, or take haiku as whatever they merely receive haiku to be, rather than researching or studying it. Even if some writers move beyond dabbling and know haiku to be more than mere jokes or syllable-counting, they may still use haiku only as a form of recreation, something to post on their blogs or Facebook pages for the amusement of friends, or themselves.

Another stance is DEVELOPMENTAL: writing haiku in order to learn techniques and skills. For example, a grade school teacher might use haiku as a means of teaching syllable-counting, or as an introduction to Japanese culture and its arts. A more advanced teacher or textbook, such as for high school or college, might employ haiku to teach Imagism or close attention to detail. Yet other teachers might use haiku as an extension of nature or environmental writing. In this stance, haiku is often used for some non-poetic purpose, such as to “demonstrate” Zen, to show Oriental aesthetics, or teach in some way, and thus is governed by an agenda more than anything else. One can learn brevity, selectivity, and other aspects of poetic craft from haiku in this way. Some writers might think of haiku as a way to learn longer poetry, as a stepping stone, or write a haiku every day as a sort of “warm-up” to updating their novel or writing longer poetry.

A third stance is MEDITATIONAL, to write haiku as a sort of awareness practice. Haiku written in this mode may account for many of its literary traditions, such as focusing on a here-and now moment, and using primarily objective sensory imagery, but its goal is not necessarily literary. Haiku in this stance might be used to clear the mind, as a Zen practice, or to help the writer cultivate an appreciation and reverence for the present moment. These poems might therefore be closer to diary entries, recording whatever happens, even if selectively, rather than seeking to create poetry. The poetic virtues of poems written in this mode might be happenstance and secondary to the goal of using haiku to deepen one’s awareness of the present moment.

A fourth stance could be referred to as DIARISTIC, or to use haiku poems as a means of recording one’s experiences and emotions, like diary entries, but without necessarily being meditational. Nevertheless, this stance may have tinges of the recreational and meditational. One writes to make a record of where one was, or what one was feeling, usually aiming to say what really happened, as one might do with travel haiku. The goal is to record impressions and experiences as they are perceived, rather than changing them as Bashō and many other Japanese masters did for aesthetic purposes. These poems need not be about visits to exotic places, as travel haiku often are, but could be about everyday life.

A fifth stance is LITERARY, to write with established techniques in mind, including both Japanese and English-language traditions. One writes with allusion, attention to rhythm and sound, and with an awareness of the vertical and horizontal axes of time and space, employing seasonal reference, the equivalent to cutting words, and primarily objective sensory imagery. This approach risks elitism and snobbery, but it takes haiku more seriously than recreational and developmental approaches, and perhaps the meditational and diaristic as well. The various literary techniques in haiku may be in endless debate, but in general they produce poems that are significantly different from recreational and developmental stances. Yet the literary stance can benefit from each of the other stances, in that one hopes the reading and writing of literary haiku still retains an element of recreational or intellectual play, amusement, or exploration, and helps readers learn images or cultural references, or combine diaristic or meditative approaches with the literary.

Indeed, haiku may often be hybrids of these stances, or might stem from other influences. In each case, the writing of haiku is typically motivated by the desire to share such poems, so at their very least they cultivate communication and connection, whether through humor or any other emotion. Therefore, one might conclude that even the worst haiku does not fail if it reaches another person and makes a connection in some way.

In each of the first four stances—recreational, developmental, meditational, and diaristic—the writing of haiku would seem to be governed or at least heavily influenced by an agenda, or “using” haiku for some other purpose. Perhaps the same could also be said of the fifth stance—literary—in that haiku is “used” in a supposedly lofty way for literary goals. But I’d like to suggest the opposite, that the literary stance is the only haiku stance without an agenda—or at least that it shouldn’t have an agenda. A haiku in this stance is not “used” for some other purpose, but written simply for its own purpose. I’m wary of art for art’s sake, because I believe art-making of any kind can have deeper fulfillments than that, and should avoid being a “vain squandering of artistic power,” as Kandinsky said in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. To my mind there’s something purer about the literary stance—which, if anything, is trying to

communicate emotion, feeling, and experience, since the purpose of haiku is to share them. But of course the literary stance still rubs shoulders with the other stances.

Where do we find poems written in each of these stances? Recreational haiku litter the Internet. And yes, I'm using a derogatory verb, which ultimately isn't fair. Such writers probably don't care about literary goals, and probably just want to have fun, appear clever, or catch attention. Or they're jumping on the bandwagon of the week. The poems written in this vein will tend to be by syllable-counters, more like paint-by-number paintings than *en plein air*. They may well be amusing, or written for the sake of popular approval. Mainstream publishers and scads of self-publishers routinely dish out books of this sort of poetry, reaching the lowest common denominator of haiku stances. In one sense, there's nothing wrong with this stance, if it's arrived at honestly. Where it might well become a problem—and too often does—is when its practitioners have the mistaken belief that they're writing literary haiku. Friction can arise easily when literary haiku poets encounter recreational haiku, yet fail to realize where the recreational haiku are coming from. Thus literary haiku writers have a burden here to respect other modes, other stances, and not immediately decry these poems because they don't measure up to literary standards. But then the recreational writers have a burden to respect literary haiku, too.

Where else do we find these poems? Developmental poems will appear in schools or textbooks, or related anthologies and websites. They often result from teaching exercises, and may be preserved as childhood or learning achievements. Such poems may even flirt with literary goals, but often the poems are a means to another end, and have an agenda such as learning what a syllable is or in tasting a foreign culture. Or perhaps promoting world peace. Poems in this mode are often subservient to these goals—these agendas. Likewise, meditational haiku might be found in Zen center publications, in the books of the spiritually minded, or in the publications or blogs of new-age or self-help organizations, perhaps with a touchy-feely sort of validation akin to some idealized affirmation. Or they might just be kept in personal notebooks, because their writers may have no motive to share or publish their work. Diaristic poems, too, may

never see the light of day, if they are written for one's self, but they can be revelatory if they do appear in a public way (I think of the privately written haiku in the famous diary, *Markings*, by United Nations secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld, published after his untimely death). And literary haiku may, one hopes, be found in the leading journals and anthologies. But of course, there's also cross-over with hybrid poems in the places we find literary haiku.

Is it necessary to make these distinctions? Perhaps these categories help us to assess the range possible in haiku. Understanding them might also help poets decide which poems to publish, if he or she thinks about which stance his or her own poems might have been written in, perhaps discarding poems written more in a recreational vein, or in too light a diaristic vein. Poems written in a *renku* session, for example, are typically socially motivated, and might easily be forgotten after the writing session is over, even if not much sake or wine was involved. In his book about *renga* and *renku*, *Haiku Before Haiku*, Steven D. Carter reports that there were *two entire centuries* of Japanese literature where not a single entire *renga* survived, although many of their starting verses were preserved.

What can we learn from this variety of stances in the writing of haiku? That each poet will produce poems shaped by the stance itself, and by each stance's unwitting goal. The poems will be the product of the understanding inherent in each approach, whether the stance is used consciously or unconsciously. Those who write literary haiku may see the other stances as stepping stones to literary haiku, and ultimately to a stance that has no limiting agenda, because they are often the stones they stepped on to get to a literary stance. But perhaps we need not consider these stances as stepping stones, or as stopping points on the way to supposed haiku mastery. Rather, a more generous approach might be to consider each stance as an island, an end unto itself—even while one can swim between the islands. Each stance may be all that each person ever wants to write, as difficult as that might sometimes be for haiku evangelists to respect. We may still want to lead all the horses to literary water, but we can never make them drink.