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Forms as Genres

The form of a poem is more than just a convenient structure. In the eyes of readers, a poem’s form links it to a whole tradition of usage. The poem becomes a member of a category, or *genre*, of poetry. In this way, the form of a poem can trigger a range of reader expectations, and so shape the way a poem is read.

Looking at Form: Haiku

Studying a simple form such as the haiku can reveal a lot about the way in which form influences the reading and writing of poetry. Haiku is a form of poetry that originated in Japan. Influential haiku poets include Matsuo Bashō, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki. In their original form, haiku were the introductory verses of longer poems called *tanka*, but they have become popular as a form in their own right since the seventeenth century.

The following are translations of some traditional haiku. Read them through, then do the activities that follow.

1.

On a withered branch
a crow has settled—
Autumn nightfall.
—Bashō

2.

Though it be broken—
Broken again—still it's there:
The moon on the water.
—Choshu

3.

Bright the full moon shines.
On the matting on the floor—
Shadows of the pines.
—Kikaku

4.

In unending rain
The house-pent boy is fretting
With his brand new kite.
—Shoha

5.

There a beggar goes
Heaven and earth he's wearing
For his summer clothes.
—Kikaku

6.

A storm wind blows—
Out from among the grasses
The full moon grows.
—Chora

7.

On a leaf, a leaf
Is casting a green shadow
And the tree frog sings!
—Anonymous

Activities

1. To help focus your reading of the poems, try to give each haiku a title that captures the subject of the poem. List your titles below.

■ Haiku 1:

- Haiku 2:
 - Haiku 3:
 - Haiku 4:
 - Haiku 5:
 - Haiku 6:
 - Haiku 7:
2. Before reading on, try to work out the *features* of the haiku form, using the seven examples as a guide. Write your answers down. You should consider such things as subject matter, structure of ideas, and layout. You may find it useful to work with a partner.

A Simple Form?

The haiku form is deceptive. It has a number of strict requirements that make the writing of good haiku quite demanding. The key features of the form are listed below.

1. A seventeen-syllable structure, organized as follows:
 - First line—5 syllables (In / un / en- / ding / rain)
 - Second line—7 syllables (The / house- / pent / boy / is / fret- / ting)
 - Third line—5 syllables (With / his / brand / new / kite)
2. A traditional subject matter emphasizing nature and the seasons, and how the seasons affect human lives.
3. An emphasis on images rather than explanation.
4. A structure of ideas based on a one-line image and a two-line image.
5. A shift in the scale of the images, from a large-scale image (the world, or natural forces) to a small-scale image (a part of the world, a person or object), or vice versa.

Go back to the haiku you have read and see how they conform to these features. (You will notice that some haiku break one or more of the conventions.)

Write a Haiku

Try writing your own haiku poem. Choose a season to represent, and try to convey your feelings about it through a pair of images. Base your images on aspects of the natural environment where you live. As starting points for images, you might find it useful to link the two ideas in each line below:

- a cloudy sky / a single ray of sunshine
- heat haze on the sand / cool ocean waves
- wind in the trees / a falling leaf

Reader Expectations

You now know quite a lot about the haiku form. This knowledge may make you a more effective reader of haiku in the future, because you will have a firm set of expectations about the genre. In short, you will know what to read or look for.

This familiarity makes it possible for new haiku either to confirm or challenge your expectations. In this way, the *genre* provides a framework within which both the reader and the writer must work. With this in mind, read the following haiku.

Tree Frogs

The tree frog chorus
Wakes me with the rising sun.
Those noisy bastards!

—Basher

Discussion

1. In what ways, if any, did this haiku surprise you? Would all readers find the poem amusing, or are there aspects of the joke that require the reader to have some knowledge of conventional haiku? You might find it useful to list the ways in which this poem plays with the traditional haiku form.
2. What does this activity reveal about the relationship between form and reader expectations?
3. Do expectations apply only to specific forms of poetry? Or do readers have expectations about “poetry in general”?

The Social Dimension

The haiku is a very popular form in Japan. Many people are enthusiastic readers and writers of haiku. This means that readers and writers share a strong set of expectations.

In Japan, the writing and reading of haiku is not merely a “literary” or “artistic” pursuit. It is also linked to broader cultural beliefs and practices—for example, a cultural life that is strongly linked to the passage of the seasons. This reminds us that forms of poetry are socially and culturally specific.

Even though you have learned the features of haiku, you still may not produce the same “response” as a Japanese reader. Haiku often seem bland to modern Western readers, who tend to prefer narrative, or a strong sense of a speaker’s voice. This suggests that our responses (which we like to see as personal) are strongly shaped by our cultural values and our training as readers.

Readers can benefit from learning something about the social and cultural origins of particular poems and forms of poetry. But this knowledge does not guarantee that the reader will make the same meaning from a poem that was intended by the poet.