

the heart of a haiku

a space for a little poem
to weave its magic!

Part 9 the definitions

The time is ripe now for me to tell you what the word ‘haiku’ means.

The “hai” in haiku comes from *haikai no renga*, humorous or comic linked poetry, which was a very old art form derived from an even older poetry genre called *waka*. And “ku” simply means a verse. So we could say that haiku is a “playful verse,” but in a creative way ... but wait, it isn’t that easy to pin it down. Professor Tsubouchi Nenten has a different take on “hai.” He says that “hai” means, literally, “not-human.” [11](#)

One of the best definitions of English-language haiku (ELH) ever attempted is from Haruo Shirane’s essay, *Beyond the Haiku Moment*: “I would say, echoing the spirit of Basho’s own poetry, that *haiku in English is a short poem, usually written in one to three lines, that seeks out new and revealing perspectives on the human and physical condition, focusing on the immediate physical world around us, particularly that of nature, and on the workings of the human imagination, memory, literature and history.*” [12](#)

It would be appropriate here to add that this definition sits well not just with English-language Haiku (ELH) but for haiku attempted in all our regional languages too.

The ‘hai’ in haiku

one coyote —
the entire mountain
howls moonlight

— Sandi Pray

moon viewing party —
the moon
arrives late

— Stanford M. Forester

cloudburst
the sound of raindrops
changing size

— Susan Constable

heat wave
the mailman fans himself
with my bills

— Bob Lucky

Imagination in haiku:

summer clouds
I pull the rope ladder up
behind me

— Susan Antolin

icy rain
at the bottom of the lake
a door to yesterday

— Fay Aoyagi

gusty storm—
the weathercock tilts
its nose up

— Kala Ramesh

The Axis

A good haiku has both a horizontal axis and a vertical axis.

The horizontal axis is a clear, vivid, concrete image the poem creates in the reader's mind. The reader can simply be content with this understanding and move on. But quite a few times the horizontal image might be unclear, and the reader could be left scratching his/her head, not knowing what the poet is trying to convey.

The vertical axis extends beyond the horizontal image, adding a deeper dimension, something that relates to one's life in a poignant way. It yields to multiple interpretations, making the poem memorable for the reader. Again note the resonance, a word that keeps getting repeated in haiku aesthetics.

The two axes were first brought to our attention by Haruo Shirane. He explains that the

horizontal axis is the focus on the present, on the contemporary world, while the vertical axis is the movement across time.

One of the best examples to show you how the vertical axis acts:

falling apple —
the branch sweeps into
a new balance

— Max Verhart

Often there's one word in a haiku which resonates throughout the words and images. In Max's poem, for me the word 'sweeps' seems to dominate and permeate through the images in the ku. This haiku takes us beyond the visual images to our own experiences of loss and the need to bounce back to regain our equilibrium.

instant coffee
my neighbour and me
set the world to rights

— John McManus, England

In John's ku the resonant word is 'rights,' which lingers behind each word and image in his ku. Sipping a hot, brewed coffee in Chennai, two people could easily be talking about their own socio-political scenario and alluding to the past. I see a very strong vertical axis here.

thunderstorm
the eyes of Shiva
on her tattoo

— Sreelatha Nair

The Semi-circle of a Haiku:

During a visit to London, I entered the art gallery in Trafalgar Square to see a group of visitors guided by a curator who was explaining a few selected paintings. We reached Caravaggio's painting of Jesus Christ. The curator spoke about Christ's smooth-shaven face. Particularly striking were the special treatment of the fruit bowl jutting off the dining table and the non-believer's arm extended towards us. The curator pointed out the lateral space that Caravaggio depicted so effectively in this painting. She said it tempts the viewer to step forward quickly and push the fruit bowl back before it falls off the table!

I was taken aback by her comments. I've known paintings that show space by not cluttering the canvas, by the stark use of white, negative spaces, or by the different treatments in brush strokes, but I had not heard anyone talk of lateral space. This technique has remained deeply etched in my mind ever since.

The oft-repeated phrase, '*the semi-circle of a haiku*' means, in simple words, not completing the story, keeping it open-ended and leaving things unsaid, which hopefully should get your reader to step into your poem — is this the lateral space?

For example: let me take a simple image to explain my point.
An open ended image:

an eagle
takes off

. . . but this image is closed:

an eagle
takes off into the sky

Leave it to your reader to imagine where s/he want the eagle to take off – from a branch close to you; from a field, after catching a snake; or maybe from a cliff treetop into the blue winter sky? ('Eagle' is a winter seasonal word.)

Personification, Anthropomorphism & Animism:

Generally, in haiku we avoid personification (anthropomorphism), such as saying a crescent moon is smiling, or the scorching sun is angry, or the rustling leaves are dancing and so on. However, if personification is done well in either a strong or subtle way, it can add much to haiku, as shown below. Animism is something close to Indian thought, especially the Advaitic idea of 'oneness,' in which a blade of grass, a mountain, that bald eagle, you and I are one pulsating consciousness. So animism will be easily understood, and when used subtly in haiku (without preaching or sermonising) it's just beautiful.

spring dream ...
slipping my wings
into a work shirt

— Michael McClintock, USA

im-mi-grant ...
the way English tastes
on my tongue

— Chen-ou Liu, Canada

returning quail
call to us from the moment
of which he speaks

— Christopher Herold

waterfall ...
do darting birds
tickle it

— Kala Ramesh

I'll leave you now to ponder ... reread this essay several times, for it has some lovely examples, and the aesthetic nuances and techniques will begin to sit in your mind. I've already explained the concept of 'ma' (a beautiful tool and my favourite) in one of my previous Monday columns.

My *special thanks* to Jenny Angyal for editing and proofreading this column.
The copyright of the haiku rests with the authors.
Copyrights of the title and the page rest with Kala Ramesh

^[1] Professor Tsubouchi Nenten is an acclaimed gendai haijin and innovator, notable for his unique creative vision, who currently teaches at Bukkyo University, Kyoto. He says "hai" means, literally, "not-human." "Concerning this topic, it is my belief – how to say this, the not-human quality, is related in a way to enrich the poetic self, as author. That is, a person – a self – within the poetic-creational realm is typically a lone (isolate) self. An isolate author. By contrast, originally, traditionally, in the haiku world poets used pen-names, that is 'haigo.' And in this manner, they obtained different selves. Take for example a poet I really like, Masaoka Shiki (1867 – 1902), who used more than a hundred pen-names. Yes – and in doing so, the pen-name becomes a kind of mask, a persona, so that the personality is changed – it's true. This was once the traditional haiku poet's, so to say, 'way' of creation." For more detailed reasoning on this topic, do check out this link: <http://gendaihaiku.com/tsubouchi/index.html> -

^[2] Haruo Shirane's essay- Beyond the Haiku Moment: Basho, Buson and Modern Haiku myths *Modern Haiku*, XXXI:1 (winter-spring 2000)

one coyote: *Mann Library Daily Haiku June 2015*.
moon viewing party: *Albatross 2004 (Romania)*
cloudburst: *The Heron's Nest XII.1*
heat wave: *The Heron's Nest IX:3*
paper moon: *Acorn #24 spring 2010*
summer clouds: *Modern Haiku 45.1*
icy rain: *Blue Willow Haiku World 2008*
thunderstorm: *Muse India, January 2016*
waterfall: *World Haiku Review Vol 6 no.3 – May 2008*

Bio:

Passionate about taking haiku to everyday spaces, Kala Ramesh initiated the 'HaikuWALL India,' where she gets graffiti artists to paint haiku on city walls. As an external faculty member of the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts she teaches undergrads haiku and other allied Japanese short forms of poetry. One can reach Kala Ramesh via editorial@pune365.com. The Haiku feature appears every Monday on Pune365.