

the heart of a haiku

a space for a little poem
to weave its magic!

part 1

Most often, the appreciation of an art form begins to take shape even before the learning process begins. Something moves us from deep within – say, when we listen to Pandit Kumar Gandharva sing one of those memorable ‘nirguni bhajans’ of Sant Kabir. Maybe we could call this stimulation, this spark as ‘*Rasa*’ — the connect between the performer and the listener. Those claps, that *wah!* arising so spontaneously from our lips when those notes or the poetry of the moment hits us.

The most important aspect of *rasa* is that it lingers on long after the stimulus has been removed. We often ruminate over a concert for days and savour the joy of its memory. Thus, although the stimulus is transient, the *rasa* induced continues.

This is very true of haiku. There were days when I would quickly switch on the computer to once again read some beautiful haiku I had read a while ago, for I needed to know how the poet could pack so much in such few words.

To begin with, shall we see how this haiku magic works?

Let’s read a few haiku that I love even after repeated readings. Take special care to notice the use of concrete words and specific images. It may surprise you to learn that the use of adjectives is kept to a minimum but the images are strong. I quote haiku written by two Japanese masters, Matsuo Basho and Kobayashi Issa, both translated by renowned authors. Can you immediately picture this in your mind or draw it on a piece of paper?

on a bare branch
a crow has alighted ...
autumn nightfall

Matsuo Basho
Translated by Makoto Ueda

Now look at your drawing. Is it a picture of autumn nightfall? Is there another diagram of a bare tree and a crow landing on a branch?

So you have two striking images ... right? One image — autumn nightfall — forms a backdrop, as in your school play, while the other image, in the foreground, shows a bird landing on a bare branch. Keep this in your memory! When two images are juxtaposed [put

together side by side] a poem becomes a haiku. Otherwise, it would just be a three line poem.

In this translation (there are many other versions too), what struck me most were the images that arise from within the poem which have not been mentioned in words. One such strong presence is the moon – I see a full moon and that to me creates the glow which helps differentiate the branch, the crow, and the night.

Let us see some more examples:

a great spot
to hear the cuckoo ...
but mosquitoes!

Kobayashi Issa
Translated by David G. Lanoue

We have a similar haiku here by a contemporary haiku poet, the late Laryalee (Lary) Fraser:

outdoor concert
the mosquitoes
off-key

I leave you here today to mull over, ruminate, and perhaps meditate over these images and will meet you a week later with much more to satisfy your hunger for this beautiful little poem called haiku.

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