

# EMPTINESS

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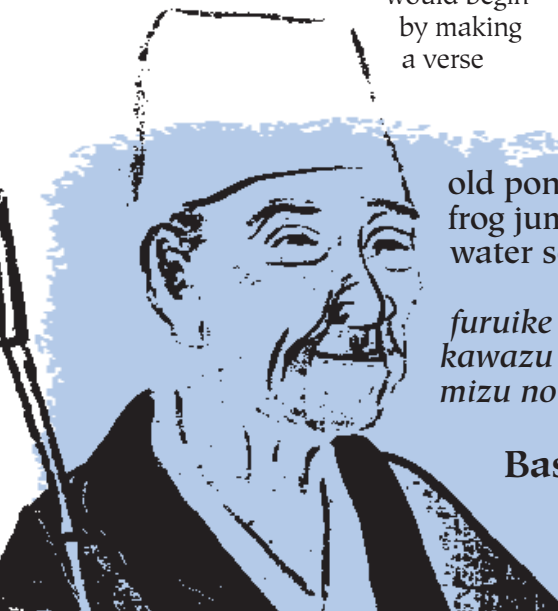
**haiku** is a Japanese form of poetry which has a long history and has touched the heart and soul of the Japanese people. Most Japanese would recognize a haiku in written or spoken form and probably could recite Bashō's famous frog haiku. And yet, just as quickly, these same people would tell you haiku is very difficult to understand the meaning, and that they themselves don't really understand it. I wondered what is this poetry that has so much cultural and historical meaning to so many people who say it is so difficult to understand?



# haiku 俳句

## BACKGROUND

During the Heian period (794-1192) there developed a fashion where poets would sit together taking turns composing poetry consisting of linked standard size verses. This form of poetry was called *renga*. One person would begin by making a verse



old pond...  
frog jumps in  
water sound

*furuike ya  
kawazu tobikomu  
mizu no oto*

**Bashō**

and then another would add a verse which was related to the preceding verse. This practice was very popular throughout society.

As a party game, the objective of outwitting ones fellow poet—the opponent—became more important than the integrity of the poem and heavy wagering often occurred. Wealthier classes had *renga* parties with famous poets in their

homes. For others there were more public events with betting, drinking, and general carousing—so much that laws were passed in an attempt to control behavior at public *renga* gatherings.

Early *renga* were

often light hearted and amusing—poetic repartee and quick wittedness were its main virtues.

By the Muromachi period (1324-1549) the long *renga* reached its zenith with intricate rules about the construction of the poems. Often these poems were over one hundred verses long. With the creation of any verse being dependent upon the verse before it means the first verse sets the tone for the whole poem. The first verse was called *hokku* and the



most capable poet of any *renga* group was selected to create the *hokku*.

Although *renga* writing was supposed to be spontaneous, as the *hokku* became increasingly important poets *came prepared*. By 1356 one famous collection of poetry included a volume of independent *hokku*, and by



**Haiga:** haiku on a scroll with a drawing

1461 a separate term had evolved to indicate those *hokku* which were not written as a part of a *renga*.

Through the years the writing of independent *hokku* developed and matured into the art of haiku.

The small drawings are from a painting by Buson depicting the writing of a *renga* by Bashō and his friend Sora at the house of Nagayama Shigeyuki in 1689. The Bashō head is also by Buson.

# haiku form

**1. Length** Traditionally haiku has a form generally identified as a 17 onji poem in a 5-7-5 relationship. Onji are similar to syllables.

**2. Season Word** In every haiku there should be a *kigo*, a word which defines the season.

**3. Cutting Word** A *kireji* separates the poem into two parts of 12 and 5, or 5 and 12 onji, as both a written and a spoken pause.

Most haiku closely approximate these rules. However as in all Art, breaking rules can lead to wonderful results. The popularity of haiku throughout the world has generated a strong opinion that some form rules are too closely tied to the Japanese experience of life, and not appropriate for international haiku.

the puppy asleep...  
pushing his feet  
against the willow-tree

*Inu no ko no  
fumaete netaru  
yanagi kana*

**Issa**  
(self portrait)

**Bashō  
Matsuo**

(1644-1694) is the most well known haiku poet. He was a master of renga when it was popular and taught poetry for a living.

He was very interested in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, and, the experience of poetic subjects. He was well known for writing about his travels in haiku. He forged a distinct life to haiku and is considered the Grand Old Master.

**Buson Yosa**  
(1716-1784)

Buson believed that haiku had withered up since the time of Bashō and so he looked to him for inspiration. He also was interested in classical chinese poetry and painting. Buson was a prolific and versatile writer and painter, and his haiku often have a painterly quality to them.

**Shiki Masaoka** (1867-1902)

Shiki is a kind of link—the last of the Great Masters of traditional haiku and the First Master of modern haiku. Until Shiki the term haiku was not commonly used. He made the term popular and brought a modern consciousness to the development of haiku. He suffered from spinal tuberculosis and died young.

When I looked back  
the man who passed  
was lost in the mist

*kaerimireba  
yuki-aishi hito  
kasumi keru*

**Shiki**

**Hai**  
俳  
entertainment,  
actor. The left part  
refers to a person;  
the two right parts  
refer to un, non person,  
outcast, which in turn is associated with  
entertainment. Hai needs to be with  
another character to actually  
mean actor (haiyū).

**Ku**  
句  
phrase,  
verse, sentence

evening breeze...  
water laps the legs  
of the blue Heron

*yukaze ya  
mizu aosagi no  
hagi utsu*

**Buson**



four  
Great  
haijin

**Issa Kobayashi (1762-1826)** Issa has touched the hearts of many Japanese in a very personal way. He grew up with a cruel stepmother who tried to steal his birthright. He lived for many years in poverty seeking recognition as a poet. All of his children born in his lifetime died as infants. The wives who bore those children died before him. And through all of his troubled life his haiku expressed appreciation of simple everyday experiences.



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