

A Recommended Approach to the Judging of Creative Writing

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This article offers an insight into ways the reader can appreciate haiku poetry. Contest judging techniques are revealed and specific judging criteria are proposed. Trying to judge short poems by applying a set of objective standards from the outset of a contest might be putting the cart before the horse. Provided that the judges of a haiku competition are experienced readers who can articulate what it is they like or dislike about a poem, and provided that there is a panel of judges and not just one person, this article proposes that there is no reason why readers shouldn't let themselves be guided first and foremost by their subjective experience of a poem.

Introduction

Reading and writing are subjective matters and there is no getting away from that fact. Whether a haiku draws you into its world, whether you find it exciting or moving, whether you feel its images are real, whether you feel you have learned something, or gained some insight, or been amused, or continue to linger thinking about it long after you've read it, or quite simply whether you enjoyed reading the haiku or not, these are subjective judgments.

Although two texts on a particular topic may contain the same number of words, have similar constructions and be grammatically correct, because of style one text may be judged by readers as vastly superior to the other. This may be particularly true of creative writing. This ability to judge creative writing is sometimes regarded as the key to differentiating the abilities of non-native and native speakers of a language. Seasoned readers likely assimilate a number of objective criteria that allow them to judge whether a text is poor, fair, good, or excellent. But how can we teach students to effectively judge literature, in particular, creative writing? This article considers the judging of haiku poetry using a point system, either a priori or after a subjective assessment has been made.

1. The Problem

Ian Mackean (2015) argues against the use of a points system when judging creative writing, noting "plot, characterization, point of view, style, and so-on are important, but to try to judge a story first and foremost by those criteria is to come at it from the wrong end. A story must be judged on its own merits, and as a whole. Creative writing is an art, and cannot be judged in the same way as examinations on mathematics or general knowledge, which can be right or wrong."

Keywords: literature, haiku, judging criteria, subjective and objective judgment

1.1. Haiku form

The haiku poet finds ways of using form and style to emphasize content, but whether formal or free verse, the end result touches the reader. The majority of haiku composed in English are arranged on 3 lines, although 1-line and 4-line haiku are commonly accepted in contests. Conventionally the first and last lines contain 5 syllables and the middle line has 7 syllables. This convention has been challenged by most haiku associations around the world. The majority of haiku that win contests contain less than 17 syllables. Season words continue to be employed in haiku, but many haiku do not adhere to traditional almanacs.

1.2. Haiku content

Poems can inspire and illuminate; a poem about the environment can move the reader to action or to tears. Poetic images can be literal or metaphorical; the poet can distil facts or amplify into the realm of imagination.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

In this study, representative examples of how international haiku contests are judged are described and analysed. The processes that student judges and notable judges follow are introduced for comparison.

2.2. Data sample

Data collected for analysis in this study includes haiku that were submitted to contests and submitted for publication to online haiku publications, as well as the contest judge comments and online comments submitted by an audience of readers of the haiku.

3. Ways in Which Haiku Contests are Judged

Haiku contests are often judged by one person, although having a panel of 3 or more judges provides for more balanced viewpoints. When possible, haiku contests are judged by all the contestants themselves during a round of voting following the contest. This requires all the contestants to be in the room or to be connected via the Internet. Haiku meetings with 200 members in one room are not unheard of in Japan, and contests held in the English language on the Internet are often convened with contestants from more than 20 countries.

3.1. International haiku contest judged in Japan

In photograph 1 we can see members at a haiku meeting who are reading and selecting winning haiku from among those entered. Haiku, but not the names of the authors, are read aloud by the meeting secretary. Apart from the author, the other members seated around the table do not know who penned a particular poem. The haiku which receives the greatest number of votes is declared the winner. However, such traditional forms of judging meetings are becoming rarer with the advent of the Internet and globalization. This has motivated haikuists to encourage Japan's Council for Cultural Affairs consider recommending haiku for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing.

Haiku selected by newspaper columnists for digital newspapers with homepages in Japan go through a blind review process and due to space restrictions in newspapers often require the paring down of entries to 1 percent of entries. As an example, in the Asahi Haikuist Network 10 haiku are selected from among 1,000 or so that contributors send on a bi-weekly basis. The column is archived allowing researchers access to a rich body of literature. For this study, a graduate student majoring in haiku was asked to select what he judged as the best 10 poems from the winter and spring season columns. These were his selections arranged on one line (each poem was originally printed on 3 lines), with the reason why each haiku was chosen written underneath as a quote from the student-judge. Form was an important criteria in the selection of the poems. The lengths of these poems were short, always less than 17 syllables. The student tended to select poems that created synergy by pitting two images together. Preferred themes tended toward family life.

Melting icicle in every drop a star

"I like it. It is very poetic and it interprets the sketch of nature."

Christmas Eve Grandpa and snowflakes enter the room

"This juxtaposition is wonderful."

Another New Year... I love her in the same way

"This poem lacks nature, but it arouses my feelings."

Temple bells grandchildren count sheep New Year's morn

"This haiku seems Zen-like."

Spring mist whitewashes bullet marks castle walk

"The keywords are strikingly different but have good juxtaposition."

The wake of an upstream eel in dawn's light

"The key words contrast the difficult work with the feeling of hope."

Breath of spring someone counts drips cancer ward

"This is a sad poem, but the writer wants to live."

Every season neighbor's rosebushes smell of old French fries

"This is an amusing anecdote."

Eternal youth... the bazy outline of a distant island

“This haiku seems Zen-like.”

Cold call... clouds collide

“The poetics of this short haiku demonstrate the power of alliteration.”

3.2. International haiku contest judged in USA

Haikuists from 21 countries competed in the Annual Bangor Haiku Group Autumn Moon Haiku Contest headquartered in the USA in 2013 (Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, Germany, India, Ireland, Kuwait, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mongolia, Montenegro, New Zealand, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Tasmania, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States). Erik Linzbach from Arizona, USA took the first prize for this haiku, despite its misspelling of the adjective well-worn, and the rarity of the noun for a garden digging tool on its first line.

a well worn mattock

leans against the shed

autumn moonlight

3.3. International haiku contests judged in Europe

Haikuists from 38 countries entered a Romanian Kukai haiku contest in 2013 (Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Columbia, Cuba, Croatia, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Mongolia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States of America and Yemen). Asni Amin from Singapore took first prize for this haiku. The judge Cezar Florin Ciobica commented “The sense of quiet acceptance in the haiku appeals to me on a deep level.”

letting go...

the butterflies I'll never

see again

Haikuists from 41 countries took part in the “Sharpening the Green Pen Haiku Contest” organized in 2013 by the European Quarterly Kukai Group (Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malta, Mongolia, Montenegro, The Netherlands, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, Switzerland, Trinidad and

Tobago, United Kingdom, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, USA, and Yemen). Sara Winteridge from England was voted by fellow entrants as the winner for a haiku composed on one line.

snow fall ~ realising the shape of things

4. Haiku contest judges

In a poignant mix of politics and poetry, since 2010 Japan's prime ministers and European Council presidents have hosted haiku contests in which the EU president even judged one of the haiku in English contests. And in retirement in 2015, Herman Van Rompuy was officially appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the title of "Haiku Ambassador for Japan-EU Friendship" (Van Rompuy, 2015). US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy has also judged contests at the International University of Kagoshima and at a high school in Okinawa.

4.1. Haiku Ambassador for Japan-EU Friendship

An avid haiku aficionado, former European Council President Herman Van Rompuy not only likes reading the traditional poems but also loves to write and judge them. Affectionately known as Haiku Herman in his hometown of Brussels, his hobby is much appreciated in Japan, therefore during the four years that he was president whenever he visited Tokyo to attend an annual summit between Japan and the European Union the Department of Foreign Affairs and the City of Matsuyama host a haiku in English contest. For the 2011 and 2012 contests, in addition to one representative from each organization appointing a judge, I was appointed as the third judge.

The Grand Prize Winners of the EU-Japan 2011 English Haiku Contest were announced at a Summit Meeting in Belgium on May 28, 2011. 366 contestants took the challenge to write a haiku on the theme of Kizuna (bonds of friendship). Sharing haiku and commenting on the haiku via popular social media software meant new bonds of friendship could be established. Two grand prizes motivated haikuists to submit their very best work. The "short list" of potential winners to be deliberated by the judges became necessarily long. Entries were received as soon as the contest opened on May 13, and continued right up to the time limit on May 23. Federica Bertacchini from Italy won the grand prize, and was invited to visit Matsuyama.

Blue sky and twelve stars

Embracing a round red sun:

A fraternal hug.

Her haiku was appreciated by the judges because of its political significance and underlined the current foreign relations. The haikuist began by describing the flags of the EU and Japan. She created a montage of these two images in the celestial sky. Juxtaposed, the flags came together as one. Personified, the friends

embraced. A hug of friendship solidified the image. As a manifesto, the haikuist explained, “In difficult times, solidarity is not enough. We need to become one country. The new flag becomes a hug of friendship, mutual understanding and collaboration.”

The grand prize winner from Japan, 23-year old Keiou Gizyuku university student Shunsuke Oyu won a trip to Brussels to meet the EU president for his haiku that thanks the many people around the world who provided support to those who suffered from the Great East Japan Earthquake. It was also appreciated by the judges for its capacity to underline the current foreign relations.

*Delightful moment—
Learning how to say thank you
in dozens of languages*

Until Van Rompuy published his first collection of haiku, it was a long-kept secret that he was a keen reader of literature, more specifically haiku. The former Belgian prime minister astonished attendees when, at an international news conference, he read out his own haiku on Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg sharing the EU presidency: *Drie golven rollen (Three waves rolling) Samen de haven binnen (Together into the harbor) Het trio is thuis' (The trio is home)* “The conciseness of haiku offers me the opportunity to penetrate the essence of words by expressing so much in so little space in an unaffected language,” Van Rompuy said at a news conference April 15, 2009 to announce the publication of his haiku collection. Most of his haiku are related to themes of politics in domestic and foreign affairs reflecting his work as the EU president.

4.2. US Ambassador to Japan

Contrary to this form of judging, when she attended a contest in Kagoshima, US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy voiced the opinion that poetry should not be judged. She preferred that students select among themselves haiku that they would like to share with her. U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy praised the efforts made by 10 haikuists in Japan who penned poems about spring trees. The contest was held to celebrate her first official visit to Kagoshima on Feb. 26, 2014. In a speech made at the International University of Kagoshima, the ambassador told 300 participants who had gathered for the event that she believed “words and ideas can change the world.”

In all, 120 contestants from across Japan had mailed haiku in English to Kagoshima. Ten were short-listed for presentation to the ambassador. University students displayed the selected haiku on signboards for the audience and gave reasons to the ambassador why they thought one particular haiku was the best. Noting the long history and traditions of Japan, she told university students, “In today’s world of business and science, it is important to express ourselves, although it can be difficult studying another language.”

After receiving the explanations and asking questions, the ambassador declared that perhaps poetry should not be judged, and decided that all 10 haiku should be commended as follows:

“I commend you on your artistic achievements and encourage you to continue to develop your poetic talents and use of the English language to further international understanding,” she said.

5. Guidelines for Using Objective Criteria to Judge Creative Writing

If a haiku works, then it worked because the form, or style, and so on were well-handled, and if it didn't work, perhaps the form, content or style had let it down. When writing comments about why a particular haiku was successful or not, and to allow the assessment to be more easily understood by participants and audience alike, the following criteria could be allocated on a 100% point system.

5.1. Creativity 20%

This criteria rewards the writer who displays the ability to provide something other than a formulaic poem and who can do so in a novel or unusual way. In reviewing the poem, the judge can ask these questions.

- Does the haiku express ideas not commonly found in the other poems?
- Can this haiku be read in an unexpected way?
- Does this haiku address the topic in a way that makes the reader think?

5.2. Traditions 20%

This criteria rewards the writer who nods to tradition, refers to a line from a well-known haiku or haikuist.

5.3. Format 20%

International haiku penned in English can be composed in a variety of forms or style:

5-7-5 syllables, 3-5-3 syllables or free style. one-line, three-line, four line haiku. Ideally submitted haiku use imagery and expression to evoke an emotional or intellectual response in the reader.

5.4. Length 10%

17 syllables or less has become the current standard for haiku penned in English.

5.5. Adherence to contest topic 10%

Topics are often related to seasons, or specific season words. The Only One Tree contest run during the summer and announced in the fall has set the theme of the “tree.”

5.6. Poetics, grammar, vocabulary 10%

The judge must decide if the grammar is understandable and does not hinder a reader's ability to comprehend the haiku.

5.7. “Aha!” factor 10%

Exceptional haiku—those that display an incredible use of vocabulary, clever ideas, enough vagueness yet allow the reader to come to an understanding with the writer and leave the reader with a lingering thought. Haiku have the power to connect the dots between what is and what could be.

6. Contestant Response to Critique

Once a haiku has been critiqued by the haiku judging committee (see photograph 1), the author may be invited to voice a reaction. In response to the online comment by Jee Leong Koh at University of Oxford,

“I’m delighted by the elegant simplicity of Ian Willey’s haiku” regarding one haiku among 20 displayed in the *Asahi Haikuist Network* column (McMurray, 2015), the author (I. Willey personal communication, August 3, 2015) responded, “Those three words are the happiest ones a haikuist can hear: elegant, simplicity, and delight.” In addition to the keywords highlighting evaluative criteria (creativity, traditions, format, length, adherence to contest topic, poetics, and aha factor) elegance, simplicity and delight might be welcomed.

Typically a haiku award ceremony is held following the announcement of winners. In photograph 2 a student is presented with a certificate on stage. Because contests have become international, and because email has become the most common form used to enter contests, winners are not always able to attend these ceremonies. For example, the student in photographs 2 is receiving an award on behalf of a classmate at the International University of Kagoshima who was unable to travel to the ceremony held at Akita International University.

At the end of haiku contests it is common to have all the winners pose for photographs on stage in front of an audience. Photograph 3 depicts the winners and judging committee for a preliminary round of judging for the Only One Tree haiku contest supported by the 30th National Culture Festival held in Kagoshima Prefecture.



[Photograph 1] haiku judging committee



[Photograph 2] haiku award ceremony



[Photograph 3] haiku contest participants

7. Future Studies

For purposes of the Only One Kagoshima Tree haiku contest to be held at the International University of Kagoshima on November 3, 2015, simply mentioning a tree or a forest in the haiku will likely be insufficient, but the poetry need not be didactic. Submitted poems could address an environmental issue directly or indirectly. Higher marks would be awarded for observations related to environmental issues, such as a personal story of a tree, its' growth, or a forest changing over time and personal reflection of the change.

8. Conclusion

The subjective experience of the reader should be the main guide as to whether or not a haiku works, and then, for such purposes as writing a review, commenting on a student's haiku, or judging a competition the assessment can include criteria such as form, length, poetics and the aha factor when it is appropriate to the particular poem.

Trying to judge short poems from the outset by applying a set of objective standards might be going about things in an inappropriate way. Provided that the judges of a competition are experienced readers who can articulate what it is they like or dislike about a poem, and provided that there is a panel of judges and not just one person, there is no reason why they shouldn't let themselves be guided first and foremost by their subjective experience of a poem. Objective standards can be used after a short list of haiku has been selected. Experienced readers have likely assimilated these objective criteria when they find that a particular haiku attracts them. When one judge is able to convince the other judges by supporting these subjective views with objective criteria, a winner can be declared.

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