

Introducing Poetry through the Japanese Haiku

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*After the bells hummed
and were silent, flowers chimed
a peal of fragrance.*

Basho

Imagination

Teachers believe that each child is a creative individual possessing an active imagination. The imagination is both a seeing and shaping power. In children, the imagination is a marked capacity for the intent, absorbed seeing of the actual, accompanied by strong responsiveness of feeling. Whenever the imagination is stirred concentration is heightened. Facts do not necessarily absorb and interest young children, nor are they inevitably excited by their own environment. One needs the catalyst of an active imagination in the teachers, to relate the facts to the child's experience, to bring the environment to life in the child's mind. One of the major purposes of education is to bring children as far as possible to true 'seeing', to make them capable of honesty towards fact and feeling. All teachers want their pupils to be responsive to experience, to develop in sympathy and understanding so as to express themselves fluently in speech and writing.

Choosing the right approach

There are many ways of stimulating children's writing and every teacher has his own methods. The moodiness and unpredictability which indicate the emotional changes going on in many children are familiar to all teachers.

There are various approaches which in several ways will help children to cope with their own growing-up. As I see it the teacher should first of all make use of their increasing awareness of themselves by inviting them to write poems which require them to sort out their own feelings and attitudes towards experience. Secondly, the teacher would provide topics for discussion and writing which give children the chance either to show a wider social awareness or to come to terms with more complicated ideas and feelings. Thirdly,

the pupils should be encouraged to write free verse. Free verse enables the child to say what he feels and means and to use the full range of his imagination without being cramped. Seeking the correct rhyme and manipulating the words to produce will often kill the original spontaneity and feeling. However, it would not be a bad idea, once the pupils are thoroughly familiar and at ease with poetry, for the teacher to introduce them to the discipline of writing in regular patterns.

Stimuli

There are various stimuli which the teacher can use in his poetry lessons. Pictures and photographs are invaluable as 'starters', particularly in that they focus attention on detail and help children to *see* as well as to *look*. Paintings can also be useful. There are many good photographs available in magazines which are easily mounted, and may be used as starting-points for original writing. A file of these can grow rapidly. The introduction of unusual and interesting objects may help to develop awareness and sharpen the senses. This helps to make writing more detailed, more exact, and above all, more spontaneous. Some examples which can arouse a strong response: oddly-shaped branches, twigs, roots and tubers are all particularly effective both visually and in stimulating a desire to *touch*. Textures are often strongly felt and pebbles, shells, conkers and bones may also be used primarily for the tactile response, though there is obviously much else besides. Leaves, feathers and pine-cones are natural objects which are easily obtainable.

Teaching the skill of thinking

It is a fact that poems cannot be written on demand, especially for our Maltese pupils who have to think and write in a foreign language. Thinking is a very important process, and a delicate one too, especially when thinking in another language. Children have many thoughts in their minds, ideas which they want to express, even in English, yet find difficulty to transfer their thoughts into words. The main reason behind this is not that

the children cannot find the words but simply when they try to speak or write down the thoughts, the thoughts just vanish. Thoughts are just a flash, then they are gone. So when a child tries to express these thoughts they seem out of reach. There is the inner life which is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously and unconsciously. There is also the thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. That process of raid, or persuasion, or ambush or dogged hunting, or surrender is the kind of thinking we have to learn. It is important to develop the skill that enables us to catch those elusive or shadowy thoughts and collect them together and hold them as much as possible so as to get a good picture. Setting one's mind on something, hence concentrating on it will bring to life various thoughts and images which can be put to writing. English lessons on concentration can be of great help. In fact practice on simple concentration on a small, simple object is the most valuable of all mental exercises. Any object will do. Five to seven minutes at a time is long enough and two minutes is enough to begin with. If the exercise is repeated every lesson, the results will show. The writing exercise follows from this. The pupils take any small, simple object and while concentrating on it they describe it in a loose verse form. Emphasis should here not be on the syllabic pattern of the poem. Far from it. The teacher should do his best to create a situation where the pupils express themselves freely and naturally without being restricted to the strict boundaries of the syllabic pattern. The description should be as detailed as possible, scientific in its objectivity and microscopic attentiveness. After some exercises of this sort, the pupil should be encouraged to extend the associations away from the object in every direction, as widely as possible, keeping the chosen subject as the centre and anchor of all his statements. Once the pupil has grasped the possible electrical connections between the objective reality and some words of his, this exercise, which at first might seem dull enough, becomes absorbingly exciting. Even where it produces poor results, the effort towards this kind of perception and description affects the way the pupil looks at, and attends to everything. I myself have tried out haiku with pupils of various abilities in Forms I and II. The following samples of feedback from the pupils show a very encouraging response.

*A long thin flower
sitting high among its leaves
looking like a queen.*

(aged 10)

*There it stood all alone
long, long and long
Among the peace of God.*

(aged 11)

*Wild, living her own life
enjoying the beautifulness of this world
stood a red wild flower.*

(aged 12)

Each haiku shows an expression of personal feelings and ideas which is extremely important for developing the creative within a child. The right stimuli will help to arouse the child's imagination and help him to put down his thoughts in writing.

Working with verse

The teacher and his pupils should work on different verse forms. The main objective of working with poetry should be that the pupils enjoy writing the poems and that they are able to express themselves freely and naturally in verse. Unless there is some content, form matters little. Yet, one should not neglect form altogether particularly since the structures of a given form, if not insisted on too rigorously, can be a valuable discipline for the young poet.

One form which the pupils and their teacher may enjoy experimenting with is the haiku. These Japanese poems reflect the simplicity and beauty of nature. As pupils learn to appreciate the craftsmanship of haiku, they will more readily understand and respond to the imagery and symbolism of much modern poetry in English. I consider the haiku as an ideal way of initiating pupils, irrelevant of their ability, to poetry.

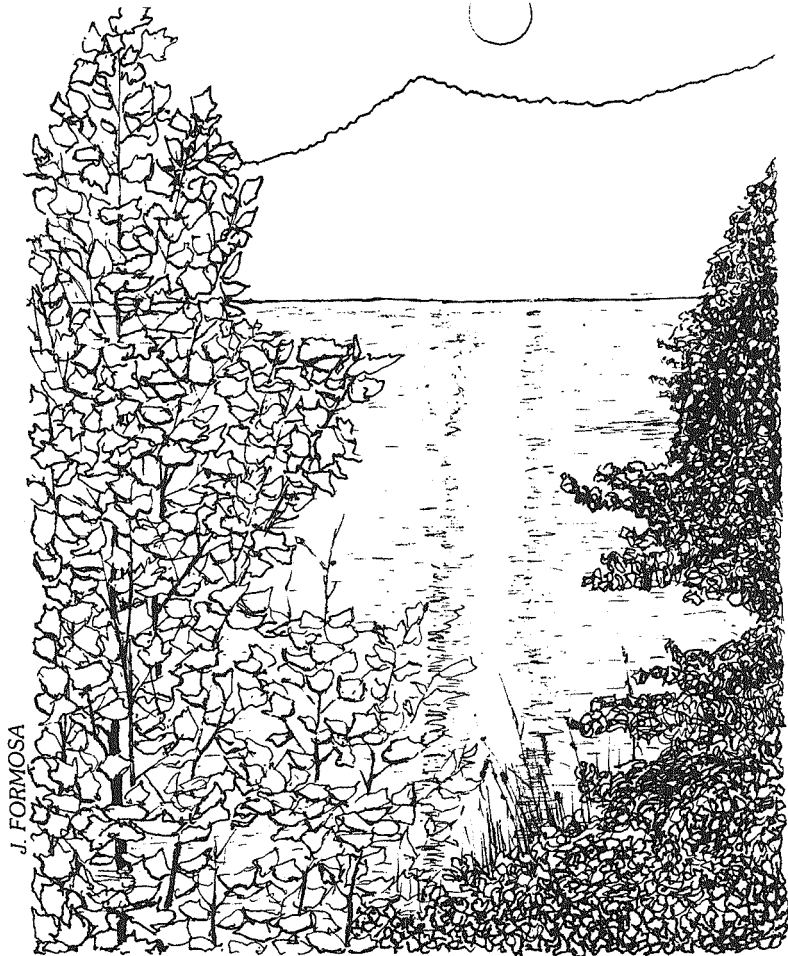
In recent years teachers abroad have been inviting pupils to compose haiku. Haiku are unrhymed poems that follow a strict syllabic pattern. A haiku is of just seventeen syllables that pattern in three lines: 5 - 7 - 5. These three-line verses in the hands of the Japanese poetmasters of the seventeenth century become delicate instruments for expressing feelings and pictures about nature and especially about seasonal variations.

Summer Night

*A lighting flash:
between the forest trees
I have seen water.*

Shiki

Through their haiku the early poetmaster attempted to grasp the "essential or essence of reality", and to achieve "direct and lucid expression" of this reality. As Edward Putzar, a historian of Japanese literature, has explained, "the power to reach this goal of understanding lies



within a child.”¹

Sometimes called an atmosphere poem, a haiku is a poem of mood and symbolism and of emotional significance. Its structure helps limit the writer to one main thought. Haiku poems are thought of as just a flash of a picture. To convey its full implications the poem must be repeated many times.

*Listen! What stillness!
Cicadas buzzing in sun,
drilling into rock.*

Basho

Haiku help teach pupils to be observant and to notice and react to beauty in everyday things. The pupils should be exposed to a number of examples of haiku and then the teacher should encourage them to generalize about the content and form of these poems. That is, some of the information given above should be brought out by the pupils themselves. At first it would be a good idea to work with the pupils as a class in composing the first new haiku. Together you can agree on a beautiful thought concerning things as trees, leaves, flowers, bird or insect life, the sun, the moon.

*As the cuckoo flies,
Its singing stretches out
Upon the water lies.*

After you have worked through several haiku together, let your pupils, in groups, or individually, try their hands at the haiku form. The teacher must not forget to state clearly the subject; and the location, time of day, and season are either mentioned or suggested. It is a fact that children cannot master all of the intricacies of the professional poet, but they can get the feel of an aesthetic moment. Children are most successful with the brief verse forms if emphasis is placed on the thoughts they are expressing rather than on the confining form. It is only after they have experienced the haiku form well that the teacher should emphasize that there are few articles or pronouns in these brief poems, and that they do not rhyme. In time the teacher can also encourage the pupils to try for the right number of syllables in each line but allow them to be a little irregular if necessary in expressing their thoughts.

*Fallen flower I see,
Returning to its branch -
Ah! a butterfly.*

1. Hennings, D.G., *Communication in Action*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1978, p. 247.