

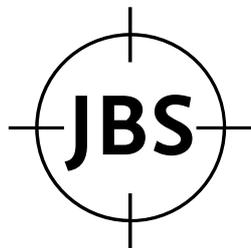
“Ku Only Live Twice”

Ian Fleming’s Use of Haiku Poetry

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One of the most satisfying ways to create imagery and express emotions in verse is the haiku, a short form of Japanese poetry. Haiku (meaning “playful verse”) is one of the oldest written forms of poetry, and Japan’s Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) is widely recognised as its foremost poet – closely followed by Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki. In the 20th century, Japanese haiku influenced well known poets such as D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. R.H. Blyth’s four-volume *Haiku* became popular from the mid- to late-1940s, attracting the attention of American Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac. The increasing interest in haiku poetry in Western culture is further advanced by the formation of the Haiku Society of America in 1968 and the British Haiku Society in 1990; both produce journals of international repute (*Frogpond* and *Blithe Spirit*, respectively).

Despite haiku’s embedment in English language poetry, the debate over what constitutes a haiku continues (Cobb 2002). There are many poets who only write using the commonly perceived syllable count for the standard three-line haiku of 5-7-5; this is superficially similar to the Japanese usage of “*on*” or *morae* (Lucas and Quine 2009, 3-8). A *mōra* is a unit defining syllable weight, where long vowels (such as the *ō* in *mōra*) can be two sounds instead of one in English. Therefore, the Japanese pronunciation of the word *mōra* has three sounds in-



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stead of two. Consequently, the 5-7-5 *morae* of Japanese haiku do not equate to English syllabic structure, leading to long, wordy haiku which are poetically less effective.

In recent years, social media users have expressed anger about the English language haiku displayed around Washington in the Golden Haiku Contest, most of which do not follow the 5-7-5 syllable count. This brought a rebuttal from several members of the Western haiku establishment which views syllable counting as outdated, restrictive and not equivalent to Japanese *morae*. Renowned Japanese haikuist and founder of the magazine *Outch*, Nobuo Hirasawa, composed 5-7-5 haiku and avoided a free-verse approach (Drovniak 1971, 54). Mr. Hirasawa, a translator at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, believed that it was hard to equate Japanese haiku to Western poems precisely because the use of *morae* does not translate well into English. British poet Martin Lucas suggested that genuine haiku can only be written in Japanese with a deep understanding of the culture; perhaps Westerners are just writing haiku-inspired poems such as Stuart Quine’s evocative one-liner from *Sour Pickle*: “distant thunder the old mouser raises an ear”. (2018, n.p.)

Haiku often include a “cutting” word (or *kireji*) which is used to juxtapose two images or ideas. This cutting word forms the separation point between the two images, and the first or second lines may end with it. Haiku should also have a seasonal reference (*kigo*) and take inspiration from some aspect of nature. What constitutes a haiku is a matter of conjecture, of course, with some believing that the West is merely writing haiku-inspired poetry rather than the strict Japanese form. This discussion crosses over to *senryū* (literally meaning “river willow”), the close poetic relation of haiku. *Senryū* are typically three lines in length, often with 17 or fewer syllables (*morae* in Japanese). However, unlike haiku, *senryū* tend to focus on human emotions rather than nature. Irony and dark, subtle humour can be used to good effect here, and the best *senryū* are often less serious than haiku. The key differences between haiku and *senryū* are summarised below.

Haiku	<i>Senryū</i>
Typically 1-3 lines	Typically 3 lines
17 syllables or fewer	17 syllables or fewer
Nature focus	Human nature focus
Serious content	Dark, subtle humour
Include a <i>kigo</i> (seasonal word)	No <i>kigo</i>
Include a <i>kireji</i> (cutting word)	No <i>kireji</i>
Unrhymed	Unrhymed
← hybrid poems →	

Modern haiku can be written in one line, whilst still retaining the *kireji* and *kigo*. This early example from the American poet Marlene Mountain published in *Frogpond* contains both elements: “pig and I spring rain” (1979). Taking the concept of minimalist one-liners even further are single word poems which rely heavily on the unsaid thing – a key part of any good haiku. The following haiku by Cor van den Heuvel published in *the window washer’s pail* is regarded as one of the best examples: “tundra”. (1963, 10)

Closely linked to haiku is *haibun*, a prosimetric literary form combining prose and haiku. *Haibun* often take the form of autobiography, essay, travel diary, and short stories. They are similar to prose poems, but the haiku and prose must work together to form a coherent piece of writing. Bashō was the most prominent Japanese writer of *haibun* with his classic *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, detailing his epic 1500 mile journey on foot through Edo Japan in the late 17th century. In this extended work, the prose and poetry alternate throughout to create a cohesive – and often profound – story. He also wrote other *haibun* about his travels including *The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel*, where haiku on the same theme intersperse with prose:

At the beach at Suma:

The moon is in the sky,
But as if someone were absent
The whole scene is empty –
The summer at Suma.

I saw the moon,
But somehow I was left
Unsatisfied –
The summer at Suma.

It was in the middle of April when I wandered out to the beach at Suma. The sky was slightly overcast, and the moon on a short night of early summer had special beauty. The mountains were dark with foliage. When I thought it was about time to hear the first voice of the cuckoo, the light of the sun touched the eastern horizon, and as it increased, I began to see on the hills of Ueno ripe ears of wheat tinged with reddish brown and fisher-

men's huts scattered here and there among the flowers of white poppy.
(Bashō 1966, 87-88)

This passage shows how seamlessly haiku can be incorporated into prose while still providing a contrast to it. Bashō's visit to Suma left him wholly unsatisfied despite seeing the moon over the sea. The prose follows on from the haiku to form a vivid description of Suma. With *haibun* it is important that the haiku and prose work together to form a story more complete than if either was missing.

Ian Fleming's prose and use of haiku in the 1964 novel, *You Only Live Twice*, appear to be inspired by Bashō's classic narratives, mixing poetry with prose in an interesting variation on the spy thriller format. The approach seems experimental in hindsight, for *haibun* were less commonly written in the English language in the 1960s than they are now. There is a strong parallel between the opening prose of Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Fleming's novel. In Bashō's prose, we get a great sense of the need for the poet to move on, a restless urge to travel:

Even while I was getting ready, mending my torn trousers, tying a new strap to my hat, and applying moxa to my legs to strengthen them, I was already dreaming of the full moon rising over the islands of Matsushima. Finally, I sold my house, moving to the cottage of Sampu, for a temporary stay. Upon the threshold of my old home, however, I wrote a linked verse of eight pieces and hung it on a wooden pillar. The starting piece was:

Behind this door
Now buried in deep grass
A different generation will celebrate
The Festival of Dolls. (Bashō, 97-98)

In the first chapter of *You Only Live Twice* (a novel largely set in Japan), Fleming introduces flowing, poetic prose which would not have been out of place in Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

Bond remembered that he had been promised a "pillow geisha." Technically, this would be a geisha of low caste. She would not be proficient in the traditional arts of her calling – she would not be able to tell humorous stories, sing, paint, or compose verses about her patron. But, unlike her cultured sisters, she might agree to perform more robust services – discreetly, of

course, in conditions of the utmost privacy and at a high price. But to the boorish, brutalized tastes of a *gaijin*, a foreigner, this made more sense than having a *tanka* of thirty-one syllables, which in any case he couldn't understand, equate, in exquisite language, his charms with budding chrysanthemums on the slopes of Mount Fuji. (Fleming, 3)

This passage neatly introduces *tanka* and the metaphorical quality of these Japanese poems of 31 syllables or less. There is a clarity and rhythm to Fleming's prose, here, which is found in the best of Bashō's *haibun* travel sketches. This is a key requirement for framing clear imagery and obtaining an emotional response from readers. *Haibun* written without literary skill or devices such as concrete imagery are often dead on the page. Fleming's strong image of "budding chrysanthemums on the slopes of Mount Fuji" conjures up a central theme of many of Bashō's *haibun*, such as that mentioned in the following passage concerning the *sakura* (cherry) blossoms of the sacred peak:

It was early on the morning of March the twenty seventh that I took to the road. There was darkness lingering in the sky, and the moon was still visible, though gradually thinning away. The faint shadow of Mount Fuji and the cherry blossoms of Ueno and Yanaka were bidding me a last farewell. (Bashō, 98)

In *You Only Live Twice*, Bond writes a "haiku" for his friend Tiger Tanaka, his Japanese ally, supposedly in the style of Bashō but not actually written by him. The poem has often been attributed to Bashō in mainstream media (due to Fleming's accreditation "after Bashō" in the novel's epigraph), but it was penned by Fleming. In the novel, Bond is on a mission to find and kill Ernst Stavro Blofeld, who murdered Bond's wife, Tracy, at the end of the previous novel, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963). Blofeld (alias Dr. Shatterhand) has taken residence in an ancient castle on the Japanese coast, where he has cultivated a magnificent "garden of death", replete with all manner of poisonous flora designed to aid suicidal Japanese in ending their lives. The novel's first mention of haiku comes as Tanaka describes for Bond the experience of one of his operatives whom he sent to investigate the mysterious Shatterhand, and who is later found badly burnt after an encounter in the deadly garden. Tiger notes that the man:

...could only babble a haiku about dragonflies. I later discovered that, as a youth, he had indulged in the pastime of our youngsters. He had tied a female dragonfly on a thread and let it go. This acts as a lure for the male dragonfly, and you can quickly catch many males in this way. They attach themselves to the female and will not let go. The haiku – that is a verse of seventeen syllables – he kept on reciting until his death, which came soon, was “Desolation! Pink dragonflies flitting above the perfumed graves”.

James Bond felt he was living inside a dream: the little room, partitioned in imitation rice-paper and cedar plywood, the open vista of a small inscrutable garden in which water tinkled, the distant redness of an imminent dawn, the long background of *saké* and cigarettes, the quiet voice of the story-teller telling a fairy-tale, as it might be told in a tent under the stars. (Fleming, 83)

Fleming introduces the concept of haiku as verses of 17 syllables, presenting the dying agent’s poem in one-line form within the prose. The haiku is a seamless part of the prose, in much the same way as Bashō’s passage about Matsushima, also forming a juxtaposition to it with the surreal imagery expressed by the agent in his last moments. The paragraph following the haiku then cleverly switches to Bond’s dream-like experience, bringing the reader into a world of altered reality where even the seemingly harmless could be seen to be deadly, much like Blofeld’s Castle of Death. This haiku deviates from the syllabic structure Tanaka has just outlined to a politely interested Bond. However, the monoku (one-line haiku) has no unnecessary syllables, an excellent illustration of why the “traditional” 5-7-5 metre is not a strict requirement. The dying agent would, presumably, have had little care for counting syllables in his last moments, so his final words are a fitting proclamation of despair in free-verse. The haiku has a clear *kireji* (cutting word) denoted by punctuating exclamation point, and obvious *kigo* (the seasonal reference to dragonflies), and an excellent juxtaposition between the two parts. The desolation is a stark counterpoint to the seemingly harmless pink dragonflies and scented graves. The haiku and *haibun*-like prose fit neatly into the narrative surrounding the poisonous flowers and lakes of Blofeld’s deadly lair.

Later in the novel, Bond and Tanaka visit a brothel formerly frequented by *tanka* poets. The following is a *haibun*-like passage containing a philosophical inscription which very closely resembles a one-line haiku:

“Bondo-san,” complained Tiger. “Please try and put out of your mind comparisons between our way of life and yours. In former times, this was a place of rest and recreation. Food was served and there was music and storytelling. People would write *tankas*. Take that inscription on the wall. It says ‘Everything is new tomorrow.’ Some man with a profound mind will have written that.” (Fleming, 118)

Here, Fleming imbues his prose with poetry akin to a zen-like philosophy; he uses the one-line format for the inscription to present the poem in a stark format where the intended emotions can be revealed. Interestingly, the poem has two readings: 1) a straight-out reading with no pause for breath, similar to sentence-style one-line haiku; or 2) a reading with a pause, similar to a caesura, between “new” and “tomorrow”. The best haiku and *senryū* should have more than one interpretation, as Fleming’s does here. Fleming finishes off the paragraph neatly with Tanaka’s observation of a philosophical man writing the inscription/poem, thus bringing the reader’s mind back to the culture of Japan and the meditative and contemplative nature of Zen Buddhism. Fleming cleverly introduced haiku poetry to a public who, at the time of publication, would have been fairly new to the genre – if aware at all of Bashō and his travel writings. Bond’s “boorish ignorance of Japanese culture” (Fleming, 118), which at first amuses Tanaka, increasingly frustrates him as the novel progresses. Of even greater annoyance to Tanaka is Bond’s ignorance of Bashō: “You would think me grossly uneducated if I had never heard of Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe. And yet Bashō, who lived in the seventeenth century, is the equal of any of them” (ibid.). Here, Fleming may very well be using Tanaka to comment on Britain’s colonial arrogance; indeed, the fact that Blofeld wears a samurai suit is symbolic of a general lack of understanding of Japanese culture and history in the West at the time of publication.¹

Later again in the novel, Fleming reasserts the belief that haiku should have seventeen syllables, using the following three examples from Bashō to demonstrate his point:

1 During the Edo period (1603-1868), the Tokugawa Shogunate governed Japan through regional feudal lords (Daimyō) who employed samurai to protect their lands. Thus, in the context of the novel, Blofeld’s assumption of a samurai suit evidences a certain lack of contextual knowledge of the power dynamics of Japanese social and political history.

in the bitter radish
that bites into me, I feel
the autumn wind

the butterfly is perfuming
its wings, in the scent
of the orchid

in the fisherman's hut
mingled with dried shrimps
the crickets are chirping (Fleming, 118)

Bond opines that he “can’t get the hang of that one” referring to Bashō’s fisherman’s hut. A deflated Tanaka challenges Bond to write a haiku, goading him: “you must have some education” (ibid.). Remarkably, Bond produces the titular haiku that “makes just as much sense as old Basho”, arrogantly asserting that “it’s much more pithy”:

you only live twice
once when you are born
once when you look death in the face (Fleming, 119)

Tanaka claps his hands in delight at Bond’s sincere poem, although he is soon dismayed that it will not translate into Japanese due to the incorrect number of syllables (although, oddly it does have 17). For the titular poem, it is a poor effort at haiku, something which Fleming acknowledged; there is no clear *kireji* and the *kigo* is absent. Instead, it reads more like an aphorism, revealing something of a fundamental truth of existence. Bond’s poem leans more towards *senryū*; perhaps Fleming felt the traditional haiku too restrictive for his central character, who completes missions with the freedom of a loner. Like the best *senryū*, it instils a sense that one cannot be truly alive much during the course of a lifetime. The rebirth it implies is symbolic of Bond’s struggle to defeat his nemesis Blofeld and lay his tragic past with Tracy to rest. Given Bond’s journey, however, perhaps the form of the poem does not really matter; it is a haiku-inspired poem.

Later, though, in Blofeld’s Garden of Death, Bond discovers the meaning of the earlier haiku mentioned to him by Tanaka: ‘they were pink dragonflies. Pink ones. Dancing and skimming. But of course! The haiku of Tiger’s dying

agent!” (Fleming, 183). This horrific affirmation from Bond reinforces the potency of the original haiku and the foreboding atmosphere of the garden as he nears the samurai-inspired final duel with Blofeld. The use of a haiku as a plot device must have been quite original at the time (certainly in the West), and the *haibun*-style passages in Fleming’s prose lend the story a strong sense of place.

Fleming’s representation of Japanese culture may have been awkward, but it is hard not to be gripped by Bond’s impressions of it within the novel. *You Only Live Twice* was released within a post-war landscape dramatically altered by the Allied occupation of Japan, when interest in the culture was renewed in the West by scholars such as R.H. Blyth after earlier efforts in the 1930s (notably by Harold G. Henderson). Fleming’s fascination with haiku represents a laudable effort at introducing haiku poetry to a wider, non-poetic audience; Fleming presents – albeit inadvertently – two *senryū* poems to readers: the titular poem and the minimalist writing on the whore-house wall, presumably – it is implied – written by a poet. Fleming concludes *You Only Live Twice* – in which Bond has lost his memory through his torturous encounter with Blofeld and is nursed back to life by a local Amma girl – with the following *haibun*-style passage:

James Bond took his place and unshipped the oars, and the cormorants scrambled on board and perched imperiously in the bows. Bond measured where the rest of the fleet lay on the horizon and began to row. Kissy smiled into his eyes, and the sun shone on his back; so far as James Bond was concerned, it was a beautiful day just as all the other days had been – without a cloud in the sky. But then, of course, he didn’t know that his name was James Bond. And, compared with the blazing significance to him of that single Russian word on the scrap of paper, his life on Kuro, his love for Kissy Suzuki, were, in Tiger’s phrase, of as little account as sparrows’ tears. (Fleming, 235)

The final image – “of as as little account as sparrows’ tears – indicates the increasing irrelevance of his past, a break from his trauma over Tracy, and is a fitting poetic metaphor not out of place in Bashō’s writing.

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