

Reviving Haiga: Interpreting and Painting the Haiku of Matsuo Bashō

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Abstract

Haiku is a poem that embodies qualities of Japanese art: precision, economy and delicacy; and, Matsuo Bashō fathers this literary art by showing his superb poetic skills made him Japan's significant contribution in World literature. This study aimed to interpret haiku, to revive the use of *haiga* as a creative method of interpreting a haiku/poem and to justify its use as visual interpretation as congruent with the oral interpretation.

The researcher analyzed and painted fifteen haiku of Bashō, translated by Akmakjian and Barnhill, by employing *haiga* (haiku combine with a painting) – a technique going back to the old poetic style of presenting a haiku. Alongside with the *haiga*, the study used formalism of poetry and of the structure of haiku (kigo and kireji) and the specific uses of its imageries. The visual interpretation and the formalistic interpretation were used to formulate theme and apparently the recurring.

The oral interpretation is found related to the visual interpretation; thus, the oral harmonizes with the visual and vice-versa. Indeed, the imageries helped to paint the haiku – as it gives life to the words. Also, the recurring themes in the haiku of Bashō dealt with reality: seven haiku belonged to the theme “solitude makes man sensitive”; four haiku in “resiliency enables man to survive”; and four haiku in “nothing is permanent.” Here, the study instilled that a work of literature is always a work of art; thus a *haiga* is a creative and effective method of interpreting haiku and poems.

Keywords: Haiku, Haiga, Matsuo Bashō

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Introduction

Haiku is a form of Japanese poetry that embodies qualities highly valued in Japanese art: precision, economy and delicacy. The traditional haiku form dates from the seventeenth century and has very narrowly defined rules – using in the original language only seventeen syllables in three lines with a pattern of five, seven and five syllables per line (Hynes-Berry and Miller 1992).

Matsuo Bashō is known as the greatest haiku poet and considered as the “Father of Haiku”. His haiku reflects the deep compassion for all things that, along with his superb technical skills as a poet, made him a significant figure in World literature. Bashō was well aware of the sophisticated level of his poetics: “Anyone who creates three to five haiku in a lifetime is a haiku poet. Anyone who creates ten is a master” (Akmakjian 1979).

Moreover, Bashō’s influence transcends modern Japanese literature and poetry. This study has chosen the haiku of Matsuo Bashō because of the wit and the beauty it contained. And Bashō was one of the prominent haiku poets, and his works showed great level of aesthetic and evocative quality.

Problem

This study aimed to analyze the haiku of Matsuo Bashō. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following: (1) What types of imageries are employed in the haiku? (2) What are the uses of the imageries in conveying the meaning of the haiku? And, (3) What are the recurring themes reflected in his haiku?

Significance

Haiga is the art of painting the haiku. It is not known to Philippines and (somehow) in Japan so this paper hopes to revive the practice of haiga as an integral method for interpreting the poem visually and orally. This centers the idea of correlating poetry with the visual arts. It is proving that haiku or poetry or any literary form can be an inspiration for the visual and/or tangible arts.

Related Literature

Japanese poetry has no rhyme, but it has devices, some of which defy transplantation into the English language. Readers are familiar with punning, especially in Elizabethan verse, but aside from an occasionally successful pun by John Donne or another of the so-called metaphysical poets, it does not tolerate the trick in serious English poetry. The Japanese, on the other hand, regards word-play as a grave matter. Their pivot words, which turn in two directions, often carry a large part of the burden of the poem. Of what may seem to be the innocuous in little verses consequently is that often it has a very sharp edge of wit. Moreover, an emotional dimension is added by the symbolical meaning that attaches to geographic or historic sites or to natural objects. Plum blossoms will mean love; cherry blossoms beauty; the cuckoo and the nightingale play different roles from those which our culture has assigned to them (Yohannan 1956).

Although Japanese poetry is extremely suggestive, it never loses its clarity and definiteness or its utter simplicity of form. Limited in range though it is, it achieves a kind of perfection in miniature which one is tempted to believe is the essence of poetry. Rhetoric and philosophy, which play so large a part in English poetry, are kept at arm's length by the Japanese poet, who prefers the image and its implication to the statement and its commentary.

So, poetry intimately bound up with Japanese life and literature, it had been part of their lives long ago. Famous Japanese forms of poetry were renga, tanka and haiku, but haiku achieved recognition in the world of poetry and literature because of its contents isolated only within seventeen syllables forming the refined three lines of 5-7-5 pattern (Yohannan 1956).

The haiku, like other Japanese verse form, is like painting. Many consider haiku to be literature's most subtle art form. It communicates emotion so seemingly effortlessly yet with such sophisticated force than the poems of Western poets. A haiku chooses for its subject the most common things and events of life. To write a haiku the poet "gets inside an object, experiences the objects' life and feels its feelings". A haiku does not just describe. Description introduces a division between poet and experience, stands outside them. In a haiku, poet and experience become one. All is related to all. Thus, the method of haiga as painting the haiku had been used by poets and artists long before (Akmakjian 1979), but the practice was gone because of modernity and advent of mass media.

Haiku was considered as the shortest and simplest form of poetry in Japan and in the World literature, but it took the place as the wittiest and most philosophical expression of human soul about nature, life and existence.

Haiku use imageries. Imagery in poetry is an appeal to the senses through words. Through the senses the emotions and intellect of the reader can be swiftly stirred; consequently, poetry makes much use of imagery. Then, the critic must decide the reason for, and weigh the effectiveness of, the use or disuse of such imagery. Imagery can be classified according to sense to which they are directed: visual imagery (sight), olfactory imagery (smell), gustatory imagery (taste), auditory imagery (sound), tactile imagery (touch), kinesthetic imagery (movement) and thermal imagery (temperature). Most poets have their favorite imagery or imagery-groups: certain sense impressions haunt them throughout life, or throughout particular periods of their lives (Burton 1974).

Moreover, imagery is used to move emotion. To do this, it employs two different methods – describing (description) and symbolizing. Of course, many images make use of both methods, but such a distinction can be made and is useful when we are trying to deepen our understanding of imagery. It is essential to understand exactly what a poet means by the images he is using, and to decide whether they are descriptive or symbolic, or both, since we cannot otherwise be sure that the full imaginative sympathy which should exist between poet and critic has been established.

Every good literary piece is shaped by a controlling idea. This controlling idea or the theme selects and arranges everything which goes into the story – the imagery, figures of speech, symbols, etc – used by the poet to convey the total meaning.

The theme should be understood as the writer's insight of general observation about nature, human behavior and human condition that is conveyed through elements of fiction. In the case of haiku, the theme is extracted from the whole representation of its image and tableau, even it is short and brief; there is a theme that can be formulated out of it (Kennedy and Gioia 2003).

There are many approaches to reading and interpreting literature for analysis. One of the more controversial approaches to literary analysis is the formalist (formalistic) approach. The formalist approach to literary analysis emphasizes the objective and literal interpretation of the tone, theme, and style of a literary text. The formalist literary analysis is often referred to as a scientific approach to literature because of the unembellished and literal analysis method that is applied to the written text. Formalist critics do not discuss any elements outside of the text itself such as politics or history. The formalist critic analyzes the form of a text and the content (Abrams 1993).

According to Kennedy and Gioia (2003), formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms. It is the natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship; the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature. To a formalist, a poem or story is not primarily a social, historical or biographical document; it is a literary work that can be understood only by reference to its intrinsic literary features, that is, those elements found in the text itself. To analyze a poem or story, therefore, the formalist critic focuses on the words of the text rather than facts about the author's life or the historical milieu in which it was written. The critic would pay special attention to the formal features of the text – the style, structure, imagery, tone and genre. As cited, Robert Penn Warren commented, "Poetry does not inhere in particular element but depends upon the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem".

Methodology

The study used descriptive-analytic research design and was analyzed using the formalistic approach. The study had undergone procedures of analysis: from reading the biography of the poet and the background of the haiku, followed by rereading the haiku. The study also evaluated the formalistic elements of the haiku including the object, time and place and the structure of haiku – kireji and kigo. The study proceeded to the interpretation of the literal meaning of the haiku and the identification of the imageries into descriptive or symbolical; and specified the descriptive imageries into visual, auditory, thermal, kinesthetic, olfactory, gustatory and tactile and interpreted the symbolical meaning of the haiku. Then, in answering the second problem, the researcher evaluated the haiku so as what are the uses of the identified imageries in conveying the meaning. And, the third problem was answered by the use of formalistic approach; the researcher carefully interpreted the haiku and evaluated the literal and symbolical so as to formulate the theme. After the formulation of the theme, the researcher grouped the haiku with the same theme.

Also, the study engaged in drawing and painting the haiku, as it was suggested by most of haiku translators. This technique was going back to the old poetic style of presenting a haiku; it was called “haiga” in which a haiku is combined with a drawing.

Results and Discussion

Types of Imageries used in Haiku

Haiku is short that the imagery mostly governed. The imageries employed in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō were descriptive and symbolical imageries including kigo.

Haiku are concerned with human emotions, so descriptions of nature and events were used as a device for conveying feelings. The haiku of Matsuo Bashō used numerous descriptive imageries. Since haiku is more of picture, the visual imagery was employed in most of the haiku – it was used to described particular thing or scene through the sense of sight like “the old pond,” “old-lady cherry in bloom,” “a crow settles on the dead branch,” “an open door,” “a solitary bird,” “monkey seems to want,” “a little straw raincoat,” “me without a hat,” “the road is empty,” “the evening is falling,” “ill on a journey” and “withered fields”. There were also visual – kinesthetic imageries like “a frog jumps in”, “I take the dark path”, “daffodil leaves bend under the flakes” and “withered and bent over...bamboo in snow”. There were visual – thermal imageries: “autumn evening,” “autumn wind,” “sad autumn,” “first snow,” “passing clouds...scattered winter showers,” “icy night,” “first winter rain” and “a cold rain”. There were also visual – auditory imageries: “earthenware jar snaps” and “cicada chirrs”

There were also auditory imageries (“Plunk!”, “piercing cry” and “and pissing”); thermal imagery (“withering frost,” “icy night”, “cold rain”) and kinesthetic imagery (“a “passing clouds – like a dog running about and pissing scattered showers”).

In haiku, feelings are only suggested thus symbolical images represent life. Most symbolical objects in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō were common things from nature and ordinary scenes. There is a frog, a crow, solitary birds (cuckoo), cicada and monkey a daffodil, bamboo, a cherry tree (melancholic blossoms), an empty road, the clouds, the falling evening, an old pond and even the “journey”.

An addition to the imageries is Japanese poetic element of haiku called “kigo”. To the Japanese a highly important element is the kigo, the season word. In each haiku a season is either described or implied. It was also evident in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō, winter haiku was classified through the use of “first snow”, “flakes”, “snow”, “icy night” and “winter rain”, it is a spring haiku when there is “in bloom” and autumn haiku when there is explicit “autumn evening”, “autumn wind” and “sad autumn”.

Use of Imageries in Haiku

The imageries helped to paint the haiku to be real – as it gives life to the words for a haiku is a glimpse captured from a simple object and scene in life. According to Burton, imagery in poetry is an appeal to the senses through words. Through the

senses the emotions and intellect of the reader can be swiftly stirred; consequently, poetry makes much use of imagery. Then, the critic must decide the reason for, and weigh the effectiveness of, the use or disuse of such imagery. (1974)

The imageries in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō facilitate the understanding of the whole poem. The imageries are effective in conveying the meaning through (1) expressing an idea in few words, (2) symbolizing, and (3) heightening the emotion (4) complementing and reinforcing other imageries.

1. Expressing an idea in few words

All of the haiku are short and used imageries to tell and describe a particular object or a scene. It takes one, two or three words to contain one image. The imageries captured the scene into words and those words perceived the details of the image. A successful haiku is the haiku of right balance of saying too much and saying too little. All imageries used in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō express vivid pictures and imaginations as to what it really expresses.

2. Symbolizing

The imagery is used to represent a picture or even the state of the picture with symbolical meaning. The symbolic use of imagery reaches its zenith in metaphor, the most intense form that imagery can take. This imagery finds expression in one word, and the sense impression that it conveys is always subordinate to the emotional and intellectual associations that is to stir up. It describes objects with deeper meaning so as to compare, contrast and associate it in life. The imagery signifies something that is valuable to the reader's imagination.

In the haiku of Bashō, the imageries are used to convey meaning by giving it a representation to be the focal object of his haiku. The images created are the embodiment of such concrete things and abstract ideas.

As used in the haiku, the "old pond" represents the old civilization from where the "frog jumps in" that signifies a man who brings and generates change to that civilization. See Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Frog in the Old Pond (Isla, 2012)

The “crow settles on the bare branch” is an omen of death and the persona looks at the crow and believes that all things are bound to end. See Figure 2.



Fig. 2. Crow in the Branch (Isla, 2012)

The “old-lady cherry tree in bloom” is an elderly who never stops to do great things, as she compares herself to a blossoming cherry tree. See Figure 3.



Fig. 3. Old-lady Cherry in Blossom (Isla, 2012)

Other examples are like the “daffodil leaves bend under the flakes,” “withered and bent over...bamboo in snow” and “melancholic blossoms through the flower field” are representations of man who bends against the challenges of life and gets back to live his life again. The “passing cloud” is the impermanence, a thing that just comes then goes out of life. The “earthenware jar snaps” is an omen of an accident, disaster or something wrong. The “empty road” symbolizes solitude and the falling evening is telling the dusky age of the man. While the “journey” is related to the notion that “life is a journey”; here, the journey is the life that a man takes, throughout the life of a man he experienced a lot but as he paused and look at the world – he realized the things he let go and the ambitions he shattered.

3. Heightening the emotion

Imagery is used to move emotion. Images make use of both descriptive and symbolical imageries. The imageries generate feeling and appeals not just to the senses of the reader but also to the soul.

Primarily, in the haiku of Bashō, the kigo (season word), considered as imagery, develops the meaning and intensifies the feelings present in the poem. These imageries add up to the sentiment and sensation of the object.

There is autumn – “autumn evening,” “autumn wind,” and “sad autumn”. The autumn season is associated with sadness because it is the falling of the leaves and the preparation for winter. Thus, autumn intensifies the pain and solitude of the object as it reflects with the sad happening.

In Bashō’s haiku, the “snow”, “first snow”, “flakes”, “frost”, “icy night” and “winter rain” refers to winter. The winter is the coldest time of the year, and coldness is associated with sadness. The winter season serves as the challenges in life and builds up the pain as the object or the persona struggles.

On the other hand, the use of “blossom” and “in bloom” is the representation of spring. Spring is the flourishing time of the year – it is beautiful and everything was bright. Also, the visual imagery “dark path” adds to the pain and fear of the persona as to what to expect in a dark road for home. The imagery creates the gloom in the haiku; it brings the haiku into sentimentality. This auditory imagery “*chirrs*” – the happy sound of a cicada builds the notion that the cicada is alive. The auditory imagery contributes in the literal meaning of the haiku so as giving life to a simple time of the persona’s observation.

4. Complementing and reinforcing other imageries

Imageries not just describe a particular scene but complement other imageries to form a deeper meaning. These imageries reinforce such imageries to capture the totality of the haiku.

The auditory imagery “Plunk!” gives the scene the presence of action in the haiku as the frog leaps then the water splashes. The “piercing cry” complemented the “autumn wind” and created a shrilling sound resembles of crying. And the “pissing” resembles the sound of falling snow on the ground.

While the visual imagery “little straw raincoat” is what do the monkey needs to make him warm. A dream was dump through the use of the visual imagery “withered fields” – the interpretation of the persona’s dreams together with the withered fields would mean all dreams that were wasted.

Recurring Themes of the Haiku

The recurring themes of the haiku of Matsuo Bashō were profoundly touched in the discussion of imageries and the meaning. According to Zen philosophy, “The Zen mind is the everyday mind” relating to haiku as this literary form stays close to the everyday sensual world. They offer insight into things that are “useless” for others – such as feelings, human emotions through sensing nature or even themselves. But feelings are present in every haiku for it signified the condition of the human soul (Akmakjian 1979).

The haiku are simple but they express life and make the readers feel what it is to experience on that particular moment in time. The recurring themes in the haiku of Matsuo Bashō dealt with reality: seven (7) haiku belonged to the theme “solitude makes man sensitive”; four (4) haiku in “resiliency enables man to survive”; and four (4) haiku in “nothing is permanent, everything is bound to end.”

a. Solitude makes man sensitive

This theme means that by man’s being alone and lonely, he is able to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, touch and experience the world. He will be aware not just of his existence but also of the world he is in.

The first haiku with this theme is the “Earthenware jar snaps”, that being alone; the man is able to listen to the sound of the snapping jars – the sound that made the man worry for someone. Similarly, the haiku “First winter rain” expresses the idea from which the persona sees the monkey, the sense of sight is the dominant sense the

persona used. The sight of that hopeless scene means that the man is able to feel the pain of others when they are alone making them observant to see the real world.

Still on the same theme and on the sense of hearing is the “Autumn wind”, but here it was heightened by the sense of feeling. Being lonely, the sound generates the sadness. The loneliness is experienced through the wind and through the sound of sadness. The mournful aura enters the scene through the door; when one is lonely, he can feel the simple touch of nature and could even relate to the message it brings. Man and nature are connected, nature feels the existence of human but through being alone, human can feel the nature.

Another haiku that conveys the first recurring theme is the “Ill on a journey”. The persona sees and feels the world for him to keep those dreams hovering over the fields. With the persona being lonely, he is able to be sentimental and sees his dreams after detaching himself away from the world and attached himself to sense the real world. The man pauses, then, that man realizes the dream he never has.

The haiku “A cold rain starting” is about the man who sees his condition and has been sensitive to that, but solitude makes the persona to be indifferent of the world. While, “there is no one here” is a poignant haiku because it shows the condition of man who observes the world that he is in. The persona walks alone observing the road and the sunset. Also, the “Now in sad autumn” talks about loneliness that pushes the persona to go and do what his heart tells so even the path is unclear. When one is lonely, he can see the world clearly like a flying bird and sometimes associate it with the condition he is experiencing.

b. Resiliency enables man to survive

This theme is saying that problems are not reasons to cry and to wallow in sadness because there is resilience or the inner strength that motivates man to do great and prove his worth in the world. Resiliency turns man to be a fighter who struggles against his problem and has the hope to overcome it.

The first haiku belongs to this theme is “Withered and bent over”. It talks about the experience of a man who loses a child, but he must be strong like a bamboo that sways with the wind. This means that a man should be strong; even if loneliness and sadness cripples him. All he needs to do is to accept it and moves on so he can continue his life. Challenges in life such as death are part of it, all man needs to do is to go on.

The haiku “First snow of the year” connotes the idea that a man like a daffodil can stand against the adversities of life. In spite of trials, one can still bloom and continue his life.

The cherry tree being isolated from the flowers experience loneliness and the withering frost challenges the tree more, but the cherry tree still stands all by his self. With those problems and isolation that the tree experiences; he gains strength to stand.

This unique haiku of “The old – lady cherry” speaks of the capacity of the old people to inspire and their capability to do great things. The old cherry is still blossoming in her old age. Age does not determine who is strong, who is worthy to inspire and who deserves success. One can always make remarkable things.

c. Nothing is permanent; everything is bound to en

This theme resembles the common Zen belief and life’s reality of impermanence. Impermanence means that life ends and all things in the world vanish. Some of Matsuo Bashō’s haiku expressed reality of life. It tells that by knowing this notion of impermanence, loneliness arises followed by sadness and nostalgia.

A haiku that expresses this theme is the “passing clouds” which is about the impermanence. It is a reality in life that some persons or some things just come and go. They exist in the world for some time but they live a long time in the minds. Those people and things shared some time but sooner or later they will be gone. After knowing that they are gone, then, one feels loneliness and experiences nostalgia.

The “On the bare branch” is the most melancholic haiku written by Bashō. It is all about the crow alone and settling in the branch ignoring the whole world. The stillness of the scene is the sadness. The scene itself conveys the loneliness of anyone who does not mind the world – waiting for everything to end like the autumn. The crow is the omen of death but here, it is the reflection of apocalypse. The autumn means end of life – a reality of life.

In the “Oblivious”, the man is lonely thus he is aware of the chirring of the cicada. With his own awareness, he is amazed of this little creature which lives without worrying of its death. The cicada doesn’t know when its life ends so it sounds like it is celebrating its existence. The ignorance of dying is a delight of an individual.

The “old pond” talks about change. Change is the constant thing in the world. The stillness of the old pond is disturbed by a frog causing the water to splash and to ripple. Indeed, sometimes, one thing comes and brings changes.

Conclusion

The study on imagery is a difficult to deal with because of the complexity of the word meanings. The use of haiga as a method for interpreting the haiku is a great help for it gives the interpreter an idea or the tableau of what it looks like (visually). The researcher identified the imageries in the haiku; the task was misleading because not all of the words and phrases were imageries. The identification whether the imagery is descriptive or symbolical was handled but it demanded time for analysis and interpretation. The evaluation on how effective the imageries in conveying the meaning was the most complicated part of the study because it needed to relate the identified imageries to the meaning of the poem.

The formulation of theme required an emotional entanglement so to give justice to what the poet presented in his haiku. The evaluation of haiku for recurring themes involved understanding and knowledge.

Since, the study was on haiku, the analysis of this literary type was challenging for it demands careful interpretation both in literal and symbolical meaning. The haiku even if it is a five-seven-five syllable patterned poem was great for it opened a long discussion about life and existence. Haiku has distinct structure and elements, so the researcher thoroughly examined the kireji and the kigo, as well as the object, time and place present in the haiku. The discussions and meanings of the haiku were rich and sensible. Haiku expressed most of the significant things that human should be aware of. Haiku and poetry and literature as a whole, do not consider a work great because of its length but of the life it contained and conveyed.

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