

James Kirkup's Introduction to Haiku Poetry

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On the American Continent the position of R. H. Blyth¹ and Harold G. Henderson² as master introducers of haiku is still stable, and the books of William Howard Cohen,³ Kenneth Yasuda⁴ and Joan Giroux⁵ remain good introductions to haiku. And recently, Eric Amann's *The Wordless Poem: A Study of Zen in Haiku*⁶ and Van Cor den Heuvel's *the haiku anthology* of contemporary English haiku⁷ have been thought of as books which tell a great deal about English haiku.

As to James Kirkup, whose haiku and one-line haiku the writer treated in the two articles printed in the Volume 4, No.1 and the Volume 6, No.3 of this journal, has recently contributed some one-line poems⁸ to the *Frogpond*⁹ which express his view of haiku and shows that he still takes an active interest in haiku, while his very good introduction of haiku in novel form is not well known. The writer is afraid that no reviewers have so far viewed the book from this angle. The book: *Insect Summer* was published in 1971 both by Alfred A. Knopf Inc., New York, and by Random House of Canada, and now there is a rumor that it is going to be made into a movie both in the United States and in England. Since it is not known as such, and also because the writer, after having read it repeatedly, still find it an ideal book for an introduction to haiku,¹⁰ he tries here to show how appropriate the book is as an easy, pleasing and yet natural introduction to haiku poetry.¹¹

Why natural? For one thing, the heroine of the story Shizuka learns, and learns to write, haiku in her natural surroundings of a fishing hamlet in the land of poetry-loving people. She is taught haiku at elementary school like any other school child in Japan, and then by the priest of the parish Buddhist temple, who is a symbol of the villagers' culture.

For another thing, the girl poet Shizuka's way of making haiku is very natural. She does not go out in order to make haiku as most professional poets and semi-professional lovers of haiku do on a trip called *ginko* which is made solely for composing haiku, nor does she attend a meeting called *kukai* held at a certain place where the participants are expected to make haiku impromptu mostly on a given theme. In her case, haiku or poems come into her mind suddenly as she strolls or stands still watching something, with her baby brother on her back whom she is nursing.

Here are some instances from the book in which she gets in touch with haiku in her daily life.

In Chapter Nine: "At the Temple," the priest teaches her one of the best known haiku being reminded of it by the morning-glory he is taking care of. The poem is by Kaga-no-Chiyo, a well-known woman haiku poet whose works are famous for their womanly feelings. It is followed by three summer haiku, two of which are by Issa who is also one of the best known haikuists, next to Basho and Buson. Then the heroine herself composes a haiku-like short poem.

In Chapter Twelve, she remembers one of Taigi's poems on a firefly when she goes firefly-catching.

In Chapter Fourteen: "Summer Poems," again Shizuka remembers a haiku by Buson when she thinks of a massive downpour which she and other villagers are longing for. Then she meets the priest who again teaches her Onitsura's haiku which he is reminded of by what he is doing then. While their conversation

continues, some natural utterance made by her makes a haiku, says the priest, and recites another haiku by Kyorai on a watermelon while they are looking at one. Then her little brother's snore reminds her of a funny haiku by Sharai. On another occasion the priest sends her a Buson haiku written in artistic calligraphy, encouraging and honoring her passion for poetry.

In Chapter Sixteen: "Insect Ceremony," this time, Shizuka recollects and recites one of Shoha's haiku on insects, while watching "Insect Man" feeding insects.

The above episodes show how closely and matter-of-course the heroine's daily life is related with haiku poetry.

In Chapter Fifteen: "Enchantment," Shizuka is surprised that her American friend is interested in her haiku which she had translated into English and put in her letter to make it more interesting for the friend. This finding encourages the heroine to write more and more haiku and translate them. This suggests that one's talent in haiku-writing is readily recognized not only by one's neighbors but also in foreign lands.

In Chapter Nineteen, the villagers hold a moon-viewing party, a ceremony which is firstly to pay homage to the full moon; secondly, to give thanks for the huge catch; and thirdly to implore the rain-gods for a good downpour. This is a natural function for the poor, simple inhabitants of a fishing village. While helping her mother and granny to prepare for the party, all the time Shizuka is thinking of moon-viewing poems. For a moon-viewing party it is essential to express poetic thoughts about the moon. The place where the moon-viewing party is held is a typical Japanese guest room facing a typical enclosed garden of stones, moss, shingle and tea bushes (beyond which could be seen part of the bay still stained with sunset red, and the hill of the bamboo grove, above

which the full moon will soon be rising beyond the autumn flower-arrangement on the veranda altar). In the sacred alcove behind the seat of honor, (where granny's autumn flower-arrangement looks spectral in the shaking candlelight,) long narrow strips of paper have been laid out beside an ink-box and brushes for the writing of 17-syllable poems on the full moon. It is not a grand garden with a villa where more than ten haikuists gather to compose haiku. As the full moon rises, the people toast it. Even Shizuka has just a sip of sake (rice-wine). And the party goes with a swing.

Next, they recite—the priest first—rain-bringing tanka poems, and a man sings the old song for calling down rain, the whole party joining in its refrain, clapping their hands to mark the syncopated rhythm.

Then everybody has a special meal for the moon-viewing feast. They give a prayer before starting to eat folding their hands, bowing to the food and ask: "Now may I, with your permission, take food?" This is a sort of Thanksgiving party too.

After the feast is over, the priest is invited to make a poem. He takes up a fine brush and dipping it in the ink which was provided by Shizuka, writes in a silence filled with admiration and respect for his beautiful calligraphy:

Human life changes
But the wind and the moon
Are always the same.

"This profound *haiku* was received with sighs of reverence," says the author, but this is not a haiku but a bit of his view of life which is philosophical rather than poetic.

Then as the master of the house, Jiro's father is persuaded to take up the brush and compose a poem. "In his work-hardened fisherman's fingers the brush trembled a little before he wrote:

It is the gathering clouds

That make the moon shine brighter.
Endless creation.

The priest was moved by this poem written by a simple working man," Kirkup says. But this is not a haiku either. This can be called a haiku-like poem, which is rather didactic.

Then the visiting picture-card showman writes his haiku to the moon:

"The willow pond is white
Below the dark stars
Of the dwarf maple's leaves.

And he quickly brushed in a tiny picture of the pond, the weeping willows and the dwarf maples with their star-shaped leaves." Bowing he presents the poem to the priest, who bows as he gratefully accepts it, saying he would hang it in his alcove in the temple. This is a genuine haiku. The picture man, an artist, has the ability to compose real haiku.

Old Okamoto-san is next asked to compose a moon poem, and his was "one of the evening's successes" the novelist says:

A white water-lily
Sheds its petals,
And again sheds its petals.

The old man is a retired fisherman who is a little mad. It would be this madness that enabled him write an excellent haiku.

Then Shizuka is persuaded to write her haiku to celebrate the occasion. Having forgotten the poem she had composed in advance, she writes almost mechanically "with her thoughts a blank" and produces in fine brushwork:

The pond tonight is an open book:
Long lines ripple from the back of a carp.
Freedom and peace.

"Everybody liked this, and encouraged her to go on," the author says. Indeed this is a fine haiku-like short poem. While her father

and mother proudly watches their daughter, she writes again:

Tonight
There is another lantern
Hanging at the edge of the dark lake.

This is a "hokku" of Moritake's days,¹² which is funny and adroitly composed.

Then Masatoshi, who has practised the writing of classical poems with the priest, writes:¹³

The garden's raked white sand
Shines like a precious sword
Between dark rocks of cloud.

This is a tanka-like haiku—maybe he has learned "tanka"—the 31-syllable poem from old Japan—and is just like one of the author's one-line poems or haiku on Japanese gardens which are excellent. And this poem is also related with a recent event of his finding an old Japanese sword deep in the sea.

Then his friend, Shizuka's brother Jiro is encouraged to write something. He thinks a long time, smudging his fingers with ink, and then dashes off:

Looking at the full moon
Gives me a crick in the neck.

"Everyone laughed at this humorous verse, and granny urged him to complete it." At last he writes:

Rice-dumplings are better.
I do not have to look up at them.

"This caused great hilarity, and he was rewarded by another gift of sweets from the picture man's store," says Kirkup. This is a sort of "tan-renga" (a linked verse of the *tanka* length)¹⁴ in the Heian Period of old Japan (c. 800-1100 A. D.) Very funny and witty.

This haiku-writing party is followed by Shizuka's Japanese dance to the tunes of a *samisen* guitar, and then by the bon-festival dance of Shikoku Island which is known all over Japan, joined in

later by all present. They continue to dance the "awa-odori" which is mad and grotesque, until they are all exhausted and collapse on the floor.

In this natural ambience of celebrations with the haiku-writing party as a part of them, the readers can easily gain access to the amateur poets because none of the participants are professional, and it is fun to take part in their party because of the atmosphere of entertainment, though it sounds a little ritual.

Later at the end of the story the heroine, Shizuka is found to be a true poet, which fact she becomes aware of, since some of her haiku translated into English by herself and corrected by an American professor, have been printed in some magazines in the U. S. They are the poems she wrote because she just wanted to without any thought of gain or fame. And the genre of short poetry called *haiku* translated into English, was found to be acceptable in a new poetic world of a different culture, where the haiku is quite different from any of the existing types of poems, yet sounds very familiar in some ways.

In conclusion, this novel shows, besides other very interesting and fascinating episodes, how the shortest form in poetry is naturally written and enjoyed by common people, even by minors, in Japan (and has been developed into a stylized form) and yet how acceptable it is in the Western world of different culture. Furthermore, the reader of any nationality perhaps feels encouraged to try to compose some haiku himself.

Notes:

¹ Blyth's two volumes of *History of Haiku* whose first printing was issued by Hokuseido Press, Tokyo in 1963, is most famous.

² Henderson's *Haiku in English* whose first printing was issued by Charles

E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo in 1968, is most widely read.

³ The first printing of Cohen's *To Walk in Seasons* was issued by Tuttle in 1972.

⁴ The first printing of Yasuda's *The Japanese Haiku* was issued by Tuttle in 1957.

⁵ The first printing of Giroux's *The Haiku Form* was issued by Tuttle in 1974.

⁶ It is a special issue of the *Haiku Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (1969).

⁷ It was published by Anchor Press, New York, in 1974.

⁸ The one-liners are the following (one of which is left out because the writer does not think it related with haiku):

"What is haiku?—each day it's different"

It's putting oneself into oneself.

When I write haiku, I forget myself.

I get bad breath writing haiku.

A haiku shakes the living daylight out of you.

I felt something creeping up on me: a haiku.

Running a fever—haiku sweat.

A mailman mails his own haiku in his own mailbox.

Haiku—in one ear and in the other.

⁹ It is the name of the haiku magazine, quarterly, published by the newly-organized Haiku Society of America, New York. It is in its No. 3 of Volume 1 that those cited poems are printed.

¹⁰ The writer re-edited the novel into his own version, a school textbook entitled *A Summer on Haji-no-shima* with the subtitle: "An Introduction to Haiku Poetry" which was printed by permission of Alfred A. Knopf Inc., New York, and published by The Poets' Society of Japan, Nagoya, 1972.

¹¹ Today on the American Continent there are a great many English haiku produced by tens of thousands of poets. Yet many of them do not know what haiku really is. This is what some competent haikuists deplore.

¹² It was in Arakida Moritake (1473-1549)'s days that the *hokku*—17-syllable first line of the *renga* (linked verse)—was begun to be isolated and appreciated as an independent poem. Later it was called *haiku*.

¹³ By "classical poems" the author may mean the 31-syllable *tanka* which has been written since the earliest times of Japan.

¹⁴ The verse of the form was sung from the Manyo days (350-450 A.D.) toward the end of the Heian Period. The first 17 syllables were composed by one poet and the remaining 14 syllables by another.