

Tanka

Background When tanka are translated into English, the translator often must alter the syllabic structure of the poem and, in some cases, also change the number of lines. Therefore, when reading a tanka in translation, it is more important to focus on the imagery used and the emotions evoked than on the poem's form.

Ki Tsurayuki translated by Geoffrey Bownas

When I went to visit
The girl I love so much,
That winter night
The river blew so cold
That the plovers¹ were crying.

1. **plovers** (pluv' ərz) *n.* wading shorebirds with short tails, long, pointed wings, and short, stout beaks.



Snow at Senso-ji Temple in Asakusa, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Reading Strategy
Picturing Imagery What feelings and associations do the words *winter night* call to mind?

◀ Critical Viewing

How does this winter scene compare with the one described in *Ki Tsurayuki's* tanka? Explain.

[Compare and Contrast]

Ono Komachi translated by Geoffrey Bownas

Was it that I went to sleep
Thinking of him,
That he came in my dreams?
Had I known it a dream
I should not have wakened.

Priest Jakuren translated by Geoffrey Bownas

One cannot ask loneliness
How or where it starts.
On the cypress-mountain,²
Autumn evening.

2. **cypress-mountain** Cypress trees are cone-bearing evergreen trees, native to North America, Europe, and Asia.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** To which of these tanka could you relate most? Explain your answer.
2. (a) **Recall:** What is the setting of *Tsurayuki's* tanka? (b) **Infer:** What does the speaker's willingness to face that setting suggest about the depth of his love? (c) **Interpret:** What does the setting suggest about the outcome of his visit?
3. (a) **Recall:** What question does the speaker of *Ono Komachi's* tanka ask? (b) **Infer:** What do her question and her response to that question suggest about her feelings toward the man in her dreams?
4. **Make a Judgment:** Do you think a poem is more effective when it suggests a feeling or when it describes the feeling in detail? Explain.

Literary Analysis
Japanese Poetic Forms
Where does the caesura occur in this tanka?

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For: More about *Ki Tsurayuki*, *Ono Komachi*, and *Priest Jakuren*

Visit: www.PHSchool.com
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Haiku Matsuo Bashō

translated by Harold G. Henderson (first 2) and Geoffrey Bownas (last 3)

Background The haiku evolved from a form of collaborative poetry known as *renga*. At festive poetry contests during the Middle Ages, groups of writers would gather to create interlocking groups of *renga* verses, which consisted of seventeen and fourteen syllables. The results were judged by a poetry master. Listeners who attended the contests developed a love for this simple yet profound poetic form. Eventually, the *hokku*, the opening verse of a *renga*, developed into a distinct literary form known as haiku.



The Monkey Bridge in Koshu Province, 1841, Hiroshige Hitsu, Christie's, New York

The sun's way:
hollyhocks turn toward it
through all the rain of May.

Clouds come from time to time—
and bring to men a chance to rest
from looking at the moon.

The cuckoo—
Its call stretching
Over the water.

Seven sights were veiled
In mist—then I heard
Mii Temple's bell.¹

Summer grasses—
All that remains
Of soldiers' visions.

1. **Mii (mē ē) Temple's bell** The bell at Mii Temple is known for its extremely beautiful sound. The temple is located near Otsu, a city in southern Japan.

Haiku

YOSA BUSON

translated by Geoffrey Bownas

Spring rain:
Telling a tale as they go,
Straw cape, umbrella.

Spring rain:
In our sedan
Your soft whispers.

Spring rain:
A man lives here—
Smoke through the wall.

Spring rain:
Soaking on the roof
A child's rag ball.

Literary Analysis

Japanese Poetic Forms
What is the *kigo* in the third line of this haiku?

Vocabulary Builder

veiled (vāld) v. covered

Critical Viewing

Which characteristics of haiku are also evident in this painting? [**Connect**]



Sudden Shower on Ohashi Bridge, Hiroshige

Critical Viewing

Which of the four haiku by Yosa Buson would you choose to accompany this painting? Why? [**Connect**]

Haiku

Kobayashi Issa

translated by
Geoffrey Bownas



Beautiful, seen through holes
Made in a paper screen:
The Milky Way.

Far-off mountain peaks
Reflected in its eyes:
The dragonfly.

A world of dew:
Yet within the dewdrops—
Quarrels.

With bland serenity
Gazing at the far hills:
A tiny frog.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Which haiku created the strongest mental images for you? Why?
2. (a) **Recall:** In “Clouds come from time to time,” with what is the image of clouds contrasted? (b) **Interpret:** What does this contrast suggest about humanity’s relationship with nature?
3. (a) **Compare and Contrast:** In what ways are these haiku similar to and different from traditional Western nature poems that you have read? (b) **Evaluate:** What do you think a traditional Western poet could learn from haiku poems?

Literary Analysis
Japanese Poetic Forms
What two images are being contrasted in this haiku?

Vocabulary Builder
bland (bland) *adj.* mild
serenity (sə ren’ə tē) *n.* peace; tranquillity

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For: More about Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, and Kobayashi Issa
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Apply the Skills

Tanka • Haiku

Literary Analysis

Japanese Poetic Forms

1. (a) What brief story is told in the **tanka** by Ki Tsurayuki? (b) How would you describe the emotion conveyed by this poem?
2. (a) Where does the **caesura** occur in the tanka by Priest Jakuren? (b) What effect does this pause create?
3. (a) What contrasting images are presented in the **haiku** “Seven sights were veiled”? (b) What is the effect of this contrast?
4. (a) Identify the **kigo** in the haiku “Summer grasses—.” (b) In what way does this **kigo** help create a contrast between the first and third lines of the poem?

Comparing Literary Works

5. (a) Identify the nature **imagery** in the tanka by Priest Jakuren. (b) To what sense or senses does this imagery appeal?
6. (a) Use a Venn diagram like the one shown to compare and contrast the nature imagery in the tanka by Ki Tsurayuki and the Bashō haiku “The sun’s way.” (b) In what way do these poems present two different views of nature?

Ki Tsurayuki



Bashō

Reading Strategy

Picturing Imagery

7. (a) Which words help you **picture the imagery** in the four haiku by Yosa Buson? (b) What other images do you associate with these words or phrases that help you see the images in the poem?
8. (a) Which haiku or tanka created the strongest mental picture for you? (b) Identify the words or phrases in the poem that created this effect.

Extend Understanding

9. **Humanities Connection:** The process by which renga poetry is created has been compared to the artistic collaboration seen in jazz music. To what kind of music or visual art form or style would you compare tanka and haiku? Give examples to support your answer.

QuickReview

A **tanka** is a poem that, in the original Japanese, has five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables.

A **caesura** is a pause in a poem.

A **haiku** is a poem that, in the original Japanese, has three lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

A **kigo** is a word indicating the season that is being described.

Imagery is language that appeals to the senses.

When you **picture imagery**, you use your memory and imagination to mentally see, hear, smell, taste, or touch what the poet describes.

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