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EN-335
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14 April 2022

Breaking the Mold: A Contemporary Haiku Reader Response Analysis

At a young age, almost everyone within the American education system is taught what a haiku is. Ask anyone, and the general response received will be "a haiku is a poem in three lines (formatted to the left) that follows a 5-7-5 syllable pattern". While that is true to a certain degree, that is simply *not* the hard and fast rule that all haiku need to follow. As a matter of fact, some of the best haiku come from the instances when this rule is broken. A haiku is a delicate piece of poetry that needs to present a large amount of information in a short amount of time/space, which means that it needs to use every tool in its wheelhouse to help with this great feat; including how the haiku physically looks. Although seemingly unimportant, the way that a haiku is shaped on the page through line breaks, line quantity, color, word and letter relation, among many other qualities can be a leading feature in a haiku's success.

To begin, one of the most common tricks found within haiku to have the physical shape further the impact of the story is through the use of indentation. A simple indent, typically on the second line of the haiku, can be used for more than one reason. For example, Wally Swist in his book of poems, *The Silence Between Us*, uses an indent to help create a sense of wave and a literal pulse in the way that the haiku is read.

fog rolls across the meadow
    wave after wave
pulsating with crickets
        Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 64

The indentation on the second line has two functions. Firstly, it commands the reader into taking a longer pause. When reading haiku (both in one's head and out loud), the trend is to read each line individually, take a brief moment to really process what was just read, and then continue onto the next line. By adding the indentation, there is an even greater element of pause that is created. The eye naturally wants to align directly to the left side of the line, having the first letter of each word on each line be in-synch with one another. The indentation however adds a way for Swist to say "no, don't continue yet. Take an extra moment to think. And to ensure that you will, I will move the second line over so when your eye moves to where it naturally wants to go, there will be nothing there for you to read." While the idea of a "break" or a "silence" could equally be achieved through the use of an ellipses or a few dash marks, Swist intentionally chooses to put nothing in the space to add emphasis that a break is needed and that additional time should be taken to move from the first line to the second.

The other function this formation has is by punctuating the words that are spoken within the poem. The second line has the repeated word "wave". When thinking about the word "wave", the image of something with curves (or otherwise, non-straight) comes to mind. The physical

haiku creates a wave by having the second line indented. By just looking at the space where the first letter on each line is, the eye will follow a wave pattern, accentuating the point of the wave that Swist is trying to create. Similarly, a wave can often be connected to the idea of a pulse; with something moving to and fro. This, again, connects to the third line in the use of the word "pulsating" and even the first line's use of "rolls".

Simply adding in this space with an indentation can be one of the most useful tools in storytelling through haiku, even when it's just to make something more visually interesting. Bill Pauly, in his book *Walking Uneven Ground*, is a great example of using a simple design choice to make his haiku stand out above the crowd.

as
we move
the mountain

High/Coo 4, 1977;
Wind the Clock by Bittersweet, 1977
Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 22

Just by formatting the haiku to be centered as opposed to the left, and with the intentional use of line breaks, the haiku quite literally takes the formation of a mountain with the smallest point being towards the "top" (the first line) contrasted with a larger "base" on the third line. This simple formatting change creates a more compelling story to tell that more traditionally formatted haiku do not get the benefit from. Similarly, the haiku, while referencing the physical mountain shape, also references the second line "we move" by having the shape of the haiku move from what would conventionally be expected. These simple changes to how Pauly creates his haikus makes for a more interesting and engaging read for all audiences.

In another piece by Pauly from *Walking Uneven Ground*, he uses the physical alignment of certain letters to further the storytelling that the haiku is trying to convey.

moon
on
no
one

Wind the Clock by Bittersweet, 1977;
Windless Orchard 13, 1977;
Modern Haiku 31.1, 2000
Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 26

At first glance, the haiku is quite interesting to look at visually by having this waving, almost snake-like structure to the way it is presented. Upon closer inspection though, the reader notices that not only does each letter contain at least one letter 'O' within the poem, but that the

letter ‘O’ is actually stacked directly on top of one another. This was obviously a stylistic choice by Pauly that could be interpreted in many different ways. The subject of the haiku is the moon, so the way that I interpret this intentional design choice is to reflect the idea of the phases of the moon through waning and waxing. Based on the alignment of each letter ‘O’ with the other letters that comprise each word, sometimes there is dead space preceding the word, sometimes the dead space follows the word, and additionally, sometimes extra space is occupied before and/or after the word. The visual nature of the poem almost looks like the cycle of the moon phases just as it appears in the sky with sometimes the moon being visible on only certain sides of the “circle” that is visible to humans. Additionally, the actual phrase being used, “moon on no one”, could be the element of the poem that directly represents a new moon. A moon, by definition, is when the moon is not visible at night. If Pauly wanted to be “accurate” to the phases of the moon in the formation of the lines, there would have to be a line of no words, but that end up hindering the storytelling that Pauly is trying to convey, so by physically speaking out that the moon is not present, that covers the one phase of the moon cycle that cannot be visually seen.

Bill Pauly is quite the master of using the visual formation of haiku to further tell the stories he is aiming for. In this last example by Pauly, he uses almost every element that has thus far been analyzed, but still found a way to take it up another level.

jackknife
moon cuts the night
in two

Wind the Clock by Bittersweet, 1977
Bill Pauly, *Walking Uneven Ground*, 22

Right away, Pauly uses the trick of indentation to create silence by putting a noticeable amount of “dead space” preceding and following the one and only word on the first line. This stark isolation on the word “jackknife” forces the reader into truly thinking about what it is that a jackknife looks like and what it does. The second line looks reasonably “normal” compared to the rest of the piece, but it’s the third line that takes the crowning moment. Once again, the use of indentation puts a forced silence into the reader’s eyes, ears, and mouth. The large space between the words “in” and “two” create a strong gasp that almost makes it so the reader wants to accentuate each word, strongly articulating each consonant and vowel presented. Everything leading up to the third line of the haiku has been slowly building up to this moment. The idea of a jackknife, this item with a sharp blade, and the use of the word “cuts” on the second line, leading up to a literal cut on the third line by separating the only two words present. This metaphorical jackknife, a non-tangible image in the head, suddenly materializes into a real storytelling element. Bill Pauly is quite the mastered haiku writer who understands that it is not just the words written in a haiku that make it great, but even the white space of a page that can tell stories more effectively than others.

Of course, the use of empty space/indentation is not exclusive to Bill Pauly. Wally Swist in his book, *The Silence Between Us*, also understands the impact that a silence can have.

one strand of mist then the mountain
Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 84

The first notable difference is the departure from the three-line format. While "traditional", it is not a mandatory feature of a haiku. A haiku can be equally as effective so long as it maintains the nature of keeping its story and messages "short, sweet, and to the point." By only having one line, the haiku is getting its point across debatably quicker than other haikus. The second notable visual aspect of the piece is the large indentation in the middle of the line. This break in the line creates almost two separate thoughts. When the reader looks through the haiku, they will read "one strand of mist", and will then be stopped dead in their tracks. "What will come next?" may cross the reader's mind? There is a sense of pin-dropping silence, or perhaps holding one's breath, until the reveal "then the mountain". This reveal then further confirms the feelings of the reader that they should have been holding their breath, as the two subjects, "mist" and "mountain" are so starkly different from one another, that it should almost come as a shock to the reader when the big reveal does appear.

There have been a lot of great examples about the powerful impact that "dead space" can have in a haiku, but what about the exact opposite? Those instances where the fact that there is more present than maybe should be, but it's that exact presence that makes the haiku so visually interesting. Diana (Kimler) Kopp, a former student at Millikin University used that exact idea to their advantage in their entry to the *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*. While it would have been easy to cut things short, Kopp added just enough more to further hone in on the point that was being made.

green firewood
refusing to burn
we stay and talk some more
Diana (Kimler) Kopp, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, 56

Visually, the first and second lines seem to be almost the exact same length on the page (despite being a different number of characters across). At first glance, the reader would almost instinctively think that the two lines are exactly the same in length. The third line, however, chooses to be noticeably longer than the preceding two. It is actually the words that are specifically used to create the additional length that is the most interesting aspect of the whole haiku. If one were to remove the final two words of the haiku, "some more", the third line would follow suit of the previous two lines, being almost the exact same length, creating a very clean-cut box-like shape to the overall haiku. If "some more" was not present, the haiku would

almost remain the exact same anyways. The third line would just read “we stay and talk” which has a similar connotation to saying “we stay and talk some more”. However, by adding “some more”, it helps reiterate the point that the “we” that is being discussed is here to stay. Almost like they are going to be here for a while. I, as the reader, actually get the same images as the stereotypical “midwestern goodbye”, when you would expect “goodbye” to mean “goodbye”, but then the conversation somehow seems to go on for another twenty minutes. Those two simple words, by taking up more space, help Kopp get the point across that the subject of this haiku plan on being there for a while more than what was anticipated.

Thinking once again about the use of no “dead space” on the page, this can create a sense of urgency both for the reader and the author of the haiku. John Stevenson, in his book entitled *My Red*, crams every word of the haiku into a single line without a moment of breath or “dead space” to be found.

jampackedelevatoreverybuttonpushed
John Stevenson, *My Red*, 94

When the reader first looks at this haiku, it can be almost intimidating because there is so much happening all at once, that the eye doesn’t even know where to begin. Slowly, the reader will work through the poem, letter by letter, trying to decode what it is that is trying to be said. The first word(s) that are deciphered are “jam packed”, which is almost a nice tease to the reader as if to say “don’t worry reader, I understand that this haiku is jam packed, stay tuned for more”. When broken apart, the haiku reads “jam packed elevator every button pushed”. This immediately gives off images of busy office buildings and dozens, maybe even hundreds, of people trying to get to work on time or running around to meet some kind of deadline. It is a relatable feeling as well since most people at some point in their life have found themselves in a too-full elevator, trying to grasp for air. There are so many people on the elevator, and of course no one is going to the same place as one another, so every single button on the elevator has been pushed, meaning those who have the last stop on the elevator’s journey have a long trip ahead of them, with possibly more people coming and going throughout the trek. Stevenson excels in giving off an almost claustrophobic feeling, which is exactly what the content of the haiku is talking about.

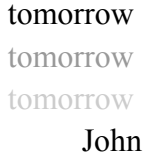
Sometimes, the use of moving lines around and the way that a line physically looks on the page can create a sense of discomfort for the reader (while being intentional from the author). After all, the human eye (specifically the American eye) is conditioned to read everything from left-to-right and from top-to-bottom, so anything that works directly against this convention can appear almost jarring to someone who may not be expecting it. Pulling once again from the *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, Travis Meishenheimer tells quite the story using this technique.

re
a
rrang
ing my life
for you
Winter's indifference

Travis Meishenheimer, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, 174

Meishenheimer's haiku is six lines long, doubling the standard length that is expected of a haiku, with four of the six lines being used to spell out one single word; "rearranging". Each syllable is pushed to a different line and no two syllables line up with one another, almost making the reader have to play "spot the syllable", learning to read from right-to-left in an almost uncomfortable way. However, I believe this was Meishenheimer's intent. The subject of the haiku is rearranging their life for someone else, and for anyone to rearrange their life to fit the desires of someone else is not an easy task, nor a fair one. In fact, doing something like that would be incredibly uncomfortable for the person who is doing the rearranging. Meishenheimer wants the reader to understand the uncomfortableness that the subject is going through, which then makes the ending more tragic that "Winter" (be it the season, or perhaps a person) is indifferent to all of the work that the subject of the haiku has been going through.

One final trick to enhance haiku storytelling through visual elements is one that most writers wouldn't think to use; color. When thinking about a page of words, everything seemingly would be either black or white (for the words and page respectively). However, the use of color is debatably the most woefully misused tool in the art of haiku storytelling. The colors don't even necessarily have to be bright and vibrant, they can be just different shades of black and grey; just as John Stevenson showcases once again in *My Red*.



John Stevenson, *My Red*, 55

The haiku is incredibly simplistic, and without the use of a color change, the haiku simply would not work. This three-line poem uses only one word repeated three times, and had the haiku only been produced with one color, the point of the haiku would not get across. By adding color, with different shades of grey becoming lighter and lighter throughout the poem, a sense of distance is created. It's almost as if the speaker of the poem is losing hope, just saying "tomorrow" over and over again, hoping that one thing will change, but as time continues on, this hope for change never seems to come. Stevenson's execution is one of the strongest elements

of making a simple decision one of the most impactful elements in successful haiku writing and storytelling.

The words of a haiku are incredibly important, and no word, sound, or syllable is chosen without a deliberate purpose. However, the most successful haiku use not just the words on the page, but everything else surrounding a word to their advantage to take their storytelling to a new level of creation.

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