

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

SHORT POEMS

by A. B. Jackson

Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined poetry as 'the best words in the best order'. Difficult enough, but even more difficult in a short poem: each word must be seen to be earning its position and in tune with its surroundings.

In addition, there are added pressures of meaning: if I incline towards the aphoristic or gnomic, will I produce nuggets of gold or a series of small pellets which reek suspiciously of sheep shit? Brevity is the mother of pretentiousness, and straining for a note of significance can often lead to mishap.

Let's start with the haiku form, or at least Western interpretations of it. The Scottish poet [Alan Spence](#) has devoted a great deal of his life to the study of Zen Buddhism, and here is a haiku from his collection *Seasons Of the Heart* (Canongate, 2000) –

a single petal falls
touches the tamboura string –
a tiny pang

Note the presence of the natural world, and the typical haiku approach of juxtaposing two elements or ideas, in this case the petal and the musical instrument. Note also the smile on your lips as you read the word 'pang'.

Among other poets, Paul Muldoon has written a series of ninety haiku under the title '90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore' (in [Horse Latitudes](#), Faber, 2006) thus turning this miniature form into an accumulative epic of witty fragments. Don Paterson's 'Renku: My Last Thirty-Five Deaths' is a darker series of thirty-six meditations, (in [Rain](#) Faber, 2009). You will also find the appealing 'Ten-minute break haiku' in Jen Hadfield's [Nigh-No-Place \(Bloodaxe, 2008\)](#), about working in a fish shop –

Just the blades prattling
on cartilage – cut here, here –
a good, fat fillet.

Note the multiple appearances of a single consonant as the vowels modulate, indicating both repetition (or drudgery) and subtle change: prat-, cart-, cut, fat, fillet. Note also how 'blades' and 'cartilage' are drawn to each other. A good balance of sound is vital at this micro-level.

The American poet A.R. Ammons wrote a lot of really short poems (collected in *The Really Short Poems of A.R. Ammons*, W.W. Norton, 1992), well worth investigating for their playfulness and a haiku-like attention to the natural world. Another short poem specialist is the American poet Kay Ryan, and here's a link to her poem 'Crown', with audio – <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178991>.

The Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie has written some outstanding short poems in her collection [The Tree House](#) (Picador, 2004), and there are few better poets to read if you want to learn about line-breaks, rhythm, and absolute clarity of purpose.

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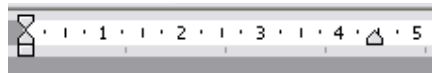
Exercises

Short poems can benefit from short lines, and being forced into short lines will make you hyper-aware of the demands of brevity and the importance of line-breaks in a tight space.

A.R. Ammons once wrote a really long poem on a roll of adding-machine tape, approximately 6 cm wide, which he spooled through his typewriter, and continued typing on every day (in diary fashion) until it ran out – Tape for the Turn of the Year, W.W. Norton, 1972. Here is an extract –

my story is how
a man comes home
from haunted
lands and transformations:
 it is
 in a way
 a great story:
but it doesn't unwind
into sequence: it stands
still
and stirs
 in itself like
boiling water
or hole of maggots

You can achieve the same effect by setting the right-hand margin in Microsoft Word (or any word processing program) to between the 4 and 5 mark, and see what kind of poem you come up with.



Alternatively, buy a small-size notebook (e.g. 9 cm wide maximum, or Moleskine pocket size) and limit yourself to poems no more than eight lines long. Or write only on Post-it notes for a few weeks. Or buy a packet of those magnetised words for the fridge door and shift them around into haiku or rhyming couplet statements.

The small poem allows for punchy, witty thoughts as well as philosophical ones. Try very plain vocabulary and also ornate vocabulary, see what difference that makes to each poem, test how much room you have to manoeuvre in your phrasing and your thinking.

Further reading

Short and Sweet: 101 Very Short Poems, edited by Simon Armitage

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