

# Haikus, trikus and three-liners

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I have recently become involved with three-line poems and I want to tell you all about them. You have probably heard of haikus and got a feeling that there's more being said than appears in a pretty picture. Like a chocolate box with the picture on the front there are indeed tasty contents. Read-on and I'll show you the knack of opening the box so you can enjoy the picture *and* the goodies. That's just about it for the traditional haiku, but there's more: As chocolates may themselves have soft or crunchy centres so the three-line form can be layered with impressions of zest and textured associations.

Luckily I began my investigation of haikus on Wikipedia which emphasised layered complexity, flexibility with English syllables, folded meanings and alternative suggestions that evolve through contemplation. Other sources that I came to later are adamant that it isn't cleverness but clear moments of serenity in the contemplation of nature and life that matter above all else in the haiku. As I hope to show, the three-line crystallisation is capable of being developed far beyond the classical Japanese haiku form.

For simplicity I'll refer to all variations as "three-liners". Let's look at an example:

(1) *Chocolate box poem*  
*Sugary picture*  
*Savoury contents*

I don't want you to think this is great poetry but, like a pen-knife, you can carry it around with you ready for odd jobs. It doesn't have a deep meaning beyond the obvious idea that a poem may appear to be about a cute natural tableau but might have another layer. For example the following, is just a pleasant description.

(2) *On the lily-pad*  
*The frog croaks*  
*In the dark*

Harmless observation; slightly atmospheric, but carrying neither insight nor undercurrents of thought, mood or sensual tingling. But what about this three-liner?

(A) *Old pond . . .*  
*A frog leaps in*  
*Water's sound* **Bashō**

This is a famous poem by a famous poet and is the epitome of the traditional haiku. If we take a moment to reflect we can see how the poet is affected as he tries to capture a timeless moment in time. The first line can be read as "There's this old pond - you know the sort - I'll leave you to imagine the details" Then we can picture the frog jumping in, movement against the backdrop - just an every-day occurrence. As a painter puts a figure in a landscape to draw our attention and let us consider the relationship between parts of the picture, so the poet has put a frog and ripples into his. But the picture is *ours*. We've done the detailed painting. Finally he asks us to add another sense to our imagined scene. He doesn't say "the ripples glunked and splashed like a tiny paddle steamer". We have to find out for ourselves what water sounds like. It might seem a strange thing to say but this is the same principle as a 'song without words'. The poet's reflection is our reflection and we share his feelings.

This might appear to be an unnecessarily detailed analysis but there is one aspect that is fundamental to all three-liners: It is the *reader* who has to pick out the bones. The poet should be arranging ideas in an exquisite composition but the reader needs to do careful unpacking.

(3) *Flat-pack poem*  
*Curious instructions*  
*Need careful interpretation*

This is just another example of how a three-liner nugget can be used to encapsulate ideas. There doesn't have to be world-class

craftsmanship to a three-liner anymore than with a limerick. Just as a limerick is easily recognised so is a three-liner. That's where the similarities end.

(4) **Moving on**

*The thinking stream*  
*Drops escaping*  
*Voice of all ages*

At the other end of the spectrum here is a three-liner that I think falls properly into the haiku class. Note is that it has a title. This is often a useful 'frame' for the collection of abstract images being presented. Given the analysis of (A) you should be able to get the gist of this...

...but now there are mysterious doorways to multiple meanings: The stream "thinks" - How does it do that and what is it thinking? Perhaps it refers to a 'stream of thought'? Or both. Then what does "drops" mean? Is that 'drops down the hillside' or 'splashes of water'? Or both? There are some similarities of last lines with (A) but (if you're sitting cross-legged on the floor and going "om") we could be looking at geological time, the youthfulness of a mountain stream turning into a mature river, people ageing or different philosophies throughout history. And why is it a "voice"? What we have here is a mixture of an easily graspable picture of a stream noisily splashing its way down a hillside with abstract loose ends waiting for the reader to pick up.

(5) *Shopper's overstuffed bags*

*Packed with haste*  
*Are consumed*

A self-evident aspect of the three-liner is allowing the conventional rules of grammar to be relaxed. To stop the whole being a muddle of vaguely related words the structure and rhythmical breaks are used to mould the primary image. Now as our eye wanders over the words looking for points of suggestion we are not starting from a blank minds-eye view so there's a framework for our second and third thoughts. In this example the literal sense tells us something about carrier bags but neither the reader or writer really care

about the bags themselves. Instead, first impressions (which are very much in the eye of the reader) will be along the lines of hordes of hurrying shoppers in the January sales. Once we've got that picture of activity the reader can start picking out words and combinations of words which suggest new ideas. There are things about shoppers - Perhaps they are fat and flabby or perhaps they are the ones being consumed in the sense of being eaten, or perhaps they are consumed in the sense of being preoccupied and not taking much notice of their environment? If the shoppers are in a hurry, what happens when that 'overflows' - do people lose their temper, sense of value or what?

Remember that box of chocolates? Who sent them and why? There may be personal connections and emotional calculations outside of the box and inside your head.

(6) **Moving on**

*Spring unwinding*  
*Observe the face*  
*Not the pendulum*

Here the initial view is straightforward enough for most people to carve it on their walking stick and be done with. An inspiring encapsulated motto: 'The hands of a clock always go forward'. The more thoughtful reader will investigate the first line. If this was a proverb it would be left out; so is it merely an arabesque? No of course not. Behold the power of a good three-liner to appeal to those for whom 'cute-kitsch' is the limit of their experience and those that sit cross-legged going "om". Readers of this essay don't need telling that "Spring unwinding" (in the primary context) refers to limited time, but the additional emphasis on 'do it now' is quite significant and quite likely to be lost on the average person who simply isn't used to words being important. When eight words in (5) fills a large canvas each one must be working hard.

What about further layers? In this case they are not well integrated with the primary

theme so I don't expect any but the most dedicated hunter for alternative meanings to get anything more. How about 'Don't be a time-slave, study nature as the seasons change' and 'Take an objective look at somebody - Don't write them off as too old'. The keys are alternative interpretations of the words 'spring' and 'face'. Plenty of three-liners, eg(3), won't have any hooks for detectives, some such as (4) and (5) will be full of them. In this example the further meanings are undoubtedly obscure but can be prised out with the simple tool of looking for alternative senses of words.

(7) **Moving on**  
*Anchors weighed*  
*Heavy hearts*  
*High tide - no waves*

Perhaps it is worth trying to establish a classification for what we've discussed here. We have seen examples (1) and (3) where there is nothing more than face value and a thought worth summing-up succinctly. Let's call these sturdy little pack-horses "Three-liners".

The traditional haiku (A) and the many examples you can find for yourself, might be described as a literal picture where we're invited to feel the sensual overtones of the poet or join them in a state of contemplation.

So what about (4), (5) and (6)? Unlike the traditional haiku these are impressionist pictures and there is a definite expectation of multiple metaphorical interpretations awaiting exploration. If we call this branch "Triku" then we won't upset the traditionalists and we can be unashamed about the complexity and verve of a shoal of ideas waiting to be picked out by the reader.

(8) **Inky characters**  
*By shaking hands*  
*Sonnet or haiku*

It is so wonderful when people do the best they know how to come up with something like (2). Example (2) is really a two-liner with the last line split. "In the dark" isn't food for brain cells. We might call the all-picture-and-no-contents three-liners "Trykus". If that's how people start to express themselves then that's fine by me for some will go on to achieve beautiful compositions.

Now dim the lights, settle back in the sofa, and unwrap (8). One of many interpretations of "Inky characters" might be people who get 'get ink on their hands': Poets and Writers. Another might be Tom and Huck...  
... I wish I was next to you to share other suggestions and the crinkling of ideas ...

(9) **Soft words**  
*Brushing minds*  
*Are poetic gifts*

### **Postscript**

All the numbered examples are original.

Please don't take my word for 'what is a haiku'. There are different and more erudite views - go and have a look.

Since three-liners are easy to scribble down you can soon get started, and without much trouble you'll find yourself with picture-and-metaphor trikus like (7), and from there it is a matter of polishing facets to get internal reflections. A simple framework to begin with is Scene - Detail - Touchpaper. I tend to latch onto key image words when sketching notes for a 'proper' poem and explore from there. You can have a lot of pleasure and anguish making 'minor' adjustments with surprising effects.