

## The many shapes of the scarecrow

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Recently asking myself once more what one might say about the essence of haiku, inadvertently a comparison with a classical subject of haiku thrust itself upon me: scarecrows.

From country to country, even from region to region, they look different: made out of sticks, wire, straw or still another material, erected in a surrealistic, caricaturistic or realistic style, not or hardly or completely attired with garments that may or may not be characteristic for the country or the region. But whatever they look like, always and everywhere each one of them is recognizable for what it is - a scarecrow. The essence of a scarecrow therefore does not depend on the material used, but on the manner it is used in.

But what is the essence of a scarecrow?

Maybe one might say: a scarecrow is a material construction, making the impression of a human figure with the function to frighten off birds. Such a construction can be very sketchy, for we know that the brain almost automatically interprets vague and/or incomplete impressions as complete images. A scarecrow therefore can have many shapes, but mainly consists out of suggestion.

Something similar applies to haiku. The point is to distinguish between the material used and the way it is used in order to express something that carries the essence of haiku.

But what is the essence of haiku?

Many efforts have been made to describe that. But obviously a final definition has never been found or can not be found, for again and again attempts are being made to put the essence of haiku into words. This many a time yields muddled and/or exalted and/or vague texts.

Since nothing definite can be said about it, I think that, when one tries to put something of it into words, one can best do so as short as possible. My own present-day description or indication therefore reads thus: a haiku is a meagre construction of words, with the function to evoke the experience of being.

On the analogy of the scarecrow: a haiku can have many shapes, but mainly consists out of suggestion.

*Slightly adapted fragment of Haiku als wereldpoëzie - De vele gedaante van de vogelverschrikker (Haiku as world poetry - the many shapes of the scarecrow), published in Korteidshalve (W.J. van der Molen, Orvelte, Netherlands), vol. IX, nr. 2, (February 2000). Translated by the author.*