
***The Role of Haiku in Poetry
Therapy****

Mountain road —
sun rising warm
into the plum scent
Basho

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The use of poetry as an adjunct to therapy is growing rapidly in North America. Psychiatrists such as Jack Leedy (one of the pioneers in poetry therapy) have found that poetry can be a very effective form of communication with patients reluctant to discuss their problems. When given poems such as Cowper's "Light Shining Out Of Darkness" and Dickinson's "I'm Nobody", these patients begin to open up as they realize that others have faced life's difficulties and overcome them.

To date, poetry therapy has been used in all the common clinical situations, either on a one-to-one basis or in groups. The usual procedure is to have the patient read poems relevant to his problems and, if the discussion which follows is not enough to unburden his feelings, he is asked to write a poem of his own. Typically, the patient's poems mirror his growth of awareness. The change can be dramatic. A young immigrant girl suffering both from adjustment to a new school environment and a protracted illness was introduced to the work of Shelley and Keats and wrote:

Autumn

*My dreams
Yellow leaves, lifeless, dead.
My life
Skies gray, dark, filled with rain.
My hope
Pale, cowardly, scared
(Poetry Therapy, p. 100)*

Her poems, written over a period of a few months' treatment, successively reveal a gradual return to mental health:

Contrast

*Creation adorns the earth with flowers.
I feel the beating of swallows' wings.
The white mountain gets younger.
But dawn has not arrived in my heart.
Only affliction rests there.*

Experience

*Remember
The bright sunsets in the bamboo of your youth
When you sang
Against the shouting of the wind?
You understand so well
The beauty of the sunset
But you don't sing anymore.*

Dawn

*Everything is so peaceful, so still,
That I can almost hear the heart beat of this radiant
 blond boy.
It is a pity that I cannot sing the beauty of the dawn,
But God made me a flower,
Reflecting the miracle of this lovely morning
 (Poetry Therapy, pp. 101-102)*

While poetry therapists use all kinds of poetry — sonnets, epics, odes, elegies, ballads, lyrics and a multitude of “free” verse forms — they rarely employ haiku. Perhaps therapists

consider a three-line, seventeen-syllable poem too short to be of much use. If so, their belief is mistaken, for haiku can play a major role in poetry therapy.

Emotionally disturbed persons usually do not possess enough detachment from their problems and poetry helps them to develop this detachment. In the early stages of therapy, poems other than haiku may be more effective. Longer poems can deal in depth with the psychological problem (and its solution), while the shorter haiku cannot. As some detachment develops, however, patients may begin to benefit more from poetry which takes them away from their personal concerns.

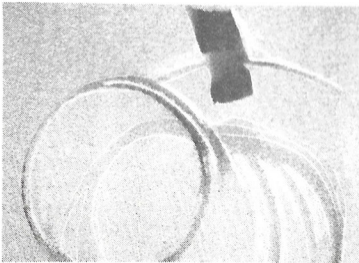
Haiku is a poetic form which avoids the use of metaphor, simile and other poetic devices, obtaining its effects primarily through the juxtaposition of sensory impressions. If done successfully, this juxtaposition creates a moment of acute awareness about the external world. The person wrapped up in himself is forced outward to a consideration of the unity of nature. For example, here is a haiku by the classical master, Basho:

*Mountain road —
sun rising warm
into the plum scent
(To Walk in Seasons, p. 44)*

Note how Basho does not intrude into the description of the dawn — he is as objective as possible. However, in the poems by the adolescent patient, the self intrudes constantly. Even in "Dawn", the most detached and optimistic of the four poems, things in nature (such as the sun, the dawn and flowers) are not allowed to speak for themselves;

instead the patient uses them to emphasize how *she* feels about the morning. To write a haiku such as Basho's, her ego would have to be strong enough to let itself dissolve and become a part of nature. Only if she could surrender her ego in this manner, could she make the reader see the morning as it really is. Such detachment (from the self) is the essence of haiku and, according to Buddhist philosophy, the essence of mental health as well. In "Dawn" the patient does demonstrate some awareness of the moment and the joy such awareness can bring. An introduction to haiku at this point in her therapy would probably have been beneficial.

I believe that patients should be introduced to haiku during the latter stages of poetry therapy when they already have acquired some detachment from their problems. The study of haiku should reinforce the trend away from self-engrossment and help to make clear what separation between "self" and "other" still exists. While other poetic forms can also lead to objectivity, the haiku is uniquely designed to do so. A greater use of haiku will not only increase the effectiveness of poetry therapy, but also give patients a sense of wonder and hope.



References

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