

The Power of Juxtaposition

by Ferris Gilli

Effective juxtaposition in haiku creates a binding of two images whose combination is stronger and more elucidating than either image alone.

Knowing how to read haiku and writing it go hand-in-hand. Those who do not know how to explore a poem beyond the surface imagery are not likely to write meaningful haiku. In order to get the most out of other folks' work, we must be willing to "read between the lines." Since all readers do not have exactly the same life experiences, a haiku may evoke associations that are unique to each reader. Therefore, different readers may discover different connections. This is a good thing.

Most haiku written in the classic construction contain two parts in juxtaposition, with each part containing an image. Ideally, the images are fundamentally different and independent of each other, and each image represents a different topic. The disparate images in a poem may be in *contrast*. Their placement emphasizes the difference between them, as in this haiku by Paul W. MacNeil:

jacaranda flowers

the twin tracks

of a car

The flowers and the car tracks do not seem to have anything to do with each other. The haiku contrasts flowers, which are part of nature, with tracks of a man-made vehicle. When I see these two images in juxtaposition, I become newly aware that products of human existence are

often present in the very midst of nature, and the reverse is true as well. Nature can be found sprouting from asphalt cracks, forming a coral reef over a sunken ship, or nesting on window ledges, among skyscrapers of concrete and steel.

Images in juxtaposition may be different objects or circumstances that are in *comparison* with each other. Such images often work together to create a mood. One image may enhance the other image, or the combination may enhance the overall tone of the poem. Readers may discover subtle similarities or unexpected associations between images, as in this haiku by Maria Steyn:

**the slow drip
of honey on bread . . .
late-autumn sun**

Finding the Cut

In general, haiku in the traditional structure, using juxtaposition of disparate images, will be *cut*, with a clear, recognisable pause between the two parts. Writers of Japanese haiku use a *kireji* or “cutting word” to separate the parts. Writers of English-language haiku don’t use cutting words; instead we use construction and punctuation to effect the pause. Ideally, we write the haiku so that there is an understood caesura regardless of punctuation.

Sense and natural speech rhythm dictate the cut. A strong, natural pause occurs in each of the following haiku, by Mary Lee McClure and Peggy Willis Lyles, respectively:

**summer daydreams —
the whicker**

of a passing dove

sweet peas

tremble on the trellis

the bride's "I will"

Each haiku breaks where the first part ends. Sometimes poets punctuate the break, as seen in these poems by Timothy Hawkes and Francis Masat:

40th birthday —

he leaves just beginning

to change color

a little girl

watching a cocoon . . .

wings

If the punctuation were left out of those haiku, the caesuras would remain. The punctuation visually indicates and emphasizes the natural pauses, but it does not create them. Even without punctuation, the following haiku are cut:

evening calm

the quavery song

of a distant loon

milky scent

of the calf's breath

morning mist

If a haiku is not clearly cut, a pause may still be present. Although the next poem does not have a hard break, I sense a soft pause at the end of the first line:

after Communion
I touch the sunlight
in her hair

Some haiku, in spite of containing a punctuated break, exhibit the “spillover” effect. This may occur when the unwritten subject (or actor) in one part of a poem is not the same as the written subject in another part of the haiku; in other words, when the poem contains a dangling modifier. Dangling modifiers are usually introductory word groups that suggest but do not name an actor. When the haiku opens with such a modifier, readers expect the subject of the haiku to name that actor. If it doesn’t, the modifier dangles, causing a spillover effect. In these cases, it is risky to assume that punctuation will distinguish the two subjects in the reader’s perception:

saying grace —
the spotted hound stares
at a beef roast

Such a talented dog! One may argue that common sense tells us that the author or another person is saying grace, certainly not the dog. But if there is spillover of the first line into the second line in the reader’s perception, even if for only an instant, that instant of distraction may be all it takes to destroy a mood and diminish resonance for the reader. The poet should

strive to avoid the possibility of confusion or unintended humour.

To achieve meaningful juxtaposition, each part of a haiku must have no fundamental connection with the other part. Each part must be clearly understood independently of the other part. **We cannot juxtapose a thing with itself.** If one places two parts of the same thing next to each other, that is not meaningful juxtaposition. In order for a haiku to contain more than one level of meaning, the juxtaposition of its two parts must produce an effect *beyond* what the reader first sees or understands. A haiku resonates when the reader discovers an unexpected relationship or association between two different things in the poem. A comparison between *clearly related* things within the same topic often fails to give the haiku resonance. Restricting a poem to a single object or topic usually precludes discovery on the reader's part. For example:

**curled
in a slipper
the kitten sleeps**

That verse is concerned with only one topic or main image: a sleeping kitten. This is the same kitten in a two-part, cut haiku that juxtaposes another, independent image with the kitten:

**rising wind
the kitten sleeps
curled in a slipper**

The explanation of the difference between a two-part haiku and a single-

image haiku may seem complicated at first. Further illustration should make the difference clear. This is a single-image verse:

**gleaming
in a blue bowl
fresh lemons**

It is a nice picture, but contains nothing to evoke a sense of discovery, nothing beyond the first impression of a pretty picture. True, there are literally two different kinds of objects in the verse, but they are part of the *same topic*. The main image (and the topic) is “lemons in a bowl.” Adding another, disparate image to create a two-part poem:

**cloudless sky
fresh lemons gleam
in a blue bowl**

The two parts are in juxtaposition. By combining the cloudless sky with the lemons in a blue bowl, I am offering an indirect comparison. This allows readers to discover the subtle similarities between the sun in the great blue sky and the small “suns” against the blueness of a bowl. Although the sky and lemons in a bowl are vastly different things, I hope that when seeing the combination in a poem, readers discover the beauty of the sky being repeated in small, earthly objects.

This haiku by Peggy Willis Lyles resonates through the juxtaposition of dissimilar or unrelated images:

noon whistle
icicles dripping
splintered light

The last two lines evoke a lovely mental picture, but there is more to the haiku than the initial perception of beauty. A whistle and icicles are unrelated; yet because of their powerful combination in this haiku, I feel as if the whistle's wail has splintered the very air. I will never again hear a noon whistle without thinking of this one that makes me imagine shattered air and light.

[The Fallacy of Instant Juxtaposition](#)

There is a popular notion that if a poet has one good image, the poet can snatch another image from just anywhere, set it beside the first one, and eureka, instant juxtaposition. Indulging in this "grab-bag" juxtaposition is not the way to write meaningful haiku. **Juxtaposition alone cannot guarantee the success of a haiku. The combination of disparate images must be effective for the poem to resonate.** When their juxtaposition is successful, the two parts of a haiku work together to evoke a sense of new awareness or to allow the poet to share a mood or emotion with readers.

[The Space Between](#)

A haiku's truth most often lies in what is *not* written. Paul W. MacNeil describes it this way: "I put it to you that it is in the space between [the parts], that space created by the break or cut, that haiku are found." When we read a haiku, the disunity of its images gets our attention; but to find resonance and the poem's inherent truth, we go deeper. Forging a partnership with the author, we enter an imaginary gap between the

diverse parts of the haiku; then we intuitively fill in what was left unsaid. Insight and inner meaning do not lie in the words we see on the page, but rather in what the juxtaposition of images *implies*. In the following haiku by John Wisdom, I am struck by the irony of the first line as juxtaposed with the rest of the poem:

**harvest moon —
migrant kids eat the bread
tossed to the crows**

Migrant workers move from harvest to harvest, following the fruit and vegetable seasons. A harvest moon suggests the abundance of food that comes with the season. Yet in stark contrast, these migrant kids are eating discarded bread off the ground. What truth lies in the space between the parts? The children may have plenty to eat, such as freshly harvested fruits and vegetables, and homemade bread as well. But perhaps the kind of bread they are used to eating is quite different and not as appealing as the kind tossed to the birds. The truth (or insight) found in “harvest moon” that resonates strongest with me, however, is that people may be going hungry even in the midst of plenty. Wisdom’s juxtaposition allows readers to discover more than one level of meaning.

Haiku as a genre is unique in that a poem’s resonance is created through a partnership between poet and reader. Like wine declared delicious by the vintner but which the dinner guests have not yet tasted, the inherent essence of the poem cannot be fully explored until people other than the author read it.

The moments of insight for both writer and reader occur by the same process. The original “aha!” usually occurs when the writer discovers an unexpected relationship between two different things. The connection for the person reading the resulting haiku occurs when he or she discovers an unexpected relationship between two different things in the poem — in other words, between the two parts of the haiku. With Lyles’s poem, we will explore how this poet-reader partnership works:

**wind chimes hushed
a stirring from within
the chrysalis**

If we read each part by itself, it makes sense without the other part. But we know the poet had a reason for putting them in juxtaposition. Even though the images are fundamentally dissimilar, we will discover that their juxtaposition gives us a new sense of awareness. Now let us enter the haiku and see where the poet takes us.

Lyles begins by focusing on the *absence* of sound. There are wind chimes, but they are quiet. As soon as I read the first line, I feel the silence. Then a faint rustling . . . ah, the chrysalis! The poet’s perfect focus causes me to be still, to hold my breath, so that I can hear the stirring of a small creature preparing for rebirth. Two distinct images — wind chimes and a chrysalis — and neither has anything to do with the other. But placed in juxtaposition, these disparate images work together to bring me right into the moment and beyond. Though it is concrete and immediate, this haiku as a whole evokes a powerfully mystical mood. I can imagine that Mother Nature stopped the wind so that the creature inside the chrysalis could

continue its metamorphosis without the distraction of chimes tinkling and clinking. The word “hushed” suggests the poet’s sense of awe and invites me to share it. The poem gives me a new awareness of the constant interaction of nature and human nature.

Lyles initiates a partnership with me (and other readers) by concisely expressing her haiku experience. She does not tell her emotions, but instead shows what she actually observed. Through rich concrete imagery, the poet invites me to enter her experience, to discover different levels of meaning in the poem, and to share her awe for an event in nature. I become her partner because I am eager to “read between the lines” and find the subtle truths.

A skilful poet can achieve resonance with a single-topic poem. However, because it is difficult to create resonance without effective juxtaposition, I advise beginners to **first become proficient at writing two-part haiku that juxtapose carefully selected, independent images**. Poets who have learned how to make haiku resonate through juxtaposition are better able to evaluate the quality of single-topic haiku, regardless of whether such poems are written by themselves or by others.

The real juxtaposition of entities, events, or conditions present in a single, specific experience evokes emotion and insight in the poet. At this point, the experience becomes a “haiku moment”. Although it follows that the same juxtaposition informs the resulting poem, not all poets work from that premise. Yet, if a haiku expresses its author’s newfound awareness and resonates for readers, does it matter how the poem came to fruition? That question spurs lively debate among haiku writers. I believe the answer cannot be cut and dried, but rather rests within each individual, according

to the poet's haiku experience and goal. This much, however, remains constant: Whether the juxtaposition is there to begin with, or whether the poet combines images from separate experiences into a single haiku, the images must work together to create resonance.

the female cardinal

lowers her crest

twilight rain

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Poem credits: Gilli, Ferris: "milky scent" *Modern Haiku* 35:3. "the female cardinal" *Frogpond* XXVI:3. Hawkes, Timothy: "40th birthday" *Acorn No. 11 Fall 2003*. Lyles, Peggy Willis: "sweet peas" *The Heron's Nest III: 7*. "wind chimes hushed" and "noon whistle" Saki Chapbook #8: *THIRTY-SIX TONES*. Masat, Fran: "a little girl" *The Heron's Nest IV: 7*. McClure, Mary Lee: "summer daydreams" *The Heron's Nest IV: 7*. MacNeil, Paul W.: "jacaranda flowers" *The Heron's Nest II:5*. The quote, "I put it . . . that haiku are found," from MacNeil, Paul W., Haikuforum Seminar on "Traditional" Renku in English, "Q & A: 3a," 9 Feb 2000. Steyn, Maria: "the slow drip" *Acorn No. 11 Fall 2003*. Wisdom, John W.: "harvest moon" *The Heron's Nest II: 11*.

Editor's note: Ferris Gilli is a well-known American writer of haiku and its related forms. She is an editor for [The Heron's Nest](#) and has also been haiku editor for *Treetops* (World Haiku Review). Her 12-lesson haiku guide *Exploring Haiku* was translated into Romanian and is being used in the Romanian school system. Ferris lives in Marietta, Georgia, in the United States.