

FRAGMENT AND PHRASE THEORY

by Jane Reichhold

The fact that the smallest literary form - haiku - has the most rules never ceases to amaze and astound. The only real comfort one can find in this situation is the concept that this affords a wider range of rules from which a writer can pick and choose. You cannot follow all of the rules and several of them are so contradictory that there is no way to honor them both at once. You must always choose. In order to make a choice, you have to understand the reasons and methods.

To write about one or two 'rules' as if these are the 'real rules' could (and should!) easily offend those of the society membership who have chosen to follow opposite or other guidelines. So let me make the disclaimer that in discussing these rules I am only discussing some of the current disciplines I am following in my own haiku writing and which are currently shared by a majority of writers.

First and foremost, and certainly the guideline which I have consciously or unconsciously followed the longest, is the one that a haiku must be divided into two parts. This is the positive side of the rule that haiku should not be a run-on sentence. There needs to be a syntactical break dividing the ku into two parts. From the Japanese language examples this meant that one line (5 onji) was separated from the rest by either grammar or punctuation (in the Japanese an accepted sound-word - *kireji* - was as if we said or wrote out "dash" or "comma").

For purposes of this discussion, I would like to call the shorter portion, the fragment and the longer portion, or rest of the poem, the phrase.

The need for distinguishing between the two parts of the ku takes on importance when one begins to discuss the use of articles (a, an, & the) because it is possible to have different rules concerning the different parts. Before getting into that, let me state that the fragment can be (or usually is) either line # one or line # three. A clear example of the first is:

rain gusts
the electricity goes
on and off

Even without punctuation the reader can hear and feel the break between the fragment (rain gusts) and the phrase (the electricity goes on and off). Also one instinctively feels that the second line break would go after goes. Yet, another author may find merit in continuing the line to read "the electricity goes on" and then let the final line bring in the dropped shoe - "and off". I chose to have "on and off" as the third line because my goal was to establish an association between "rain gusts" and "on and off". One can write of many qualities of "rain gusts", but in this ku, the "on and off" aspect is brought forward and then reinforced by bringing in the power of electricity.

An example of the fragment found in the third line is often used as answer when creating a riddle (a valid and well-used haiku technique) as in:

a vegetarian
with legs crossed in zazen
the roasting chicken

It is also possible to write ku in which the reader would have to decide which part was the fragment by combining either lines # one with # two or reading lines # two and # three together to make the phrase. An example might be:

moonlit pines
dimming
the flashlight

But even here, the fact that "moonlit pines" is not written as 'the moonlit pines' tells one that the author was silently designating the first line as the fragment even though the middle line has its own curious brevity. Still the lack of punctuation allows the reader to try out the thought that as the moonlight in the pines became dimmer someone had to turn on a flashlight. Or, reading the poem as it was experienced: the moonlight on the pines was so bright the flashlight seemed to be getting dimmer.

This brings us around to the articles and you may have already guessed the next guideline for using them. In the fragment you can often dispense with the use of an article to leave the noun stand alone. Sometimes you can even erase the preposition from the fragment especially if you are feeling that you will scream if you read one more haiku which begins with "in the garden". This guideline asks sensitivity. It is not a hard and fast rule. But during the revising stage of writing your ku, it is something to try. Cover up the preposition and the article in the fragment and see if the ku holds together. Perhaps it will even get stronger! If you feel the article and preposition are needed, then by all means, use them. Do whatever works for your voice. In the 'roasted chicken' ku I debated about leaving the articles out, but decided I felt the ku needed the 'grease to the wheels of understanding' of the articles. But if you are seeking to shorten the ku, look first to the fragment as you cross out unneeded words.

However, one cannot follow the same 'rule' in writing the phrase portion of the ku. Sometimes critics make the comment in a workshop that a haiku is 'choppy'. What they are referring to is the feeling that at the end of each line the break in syntax is final. The two lines of the phrase are not hooked together in a flow of grammar and meaning. Notice the difference between:

low winter sun
raspberry leaves
red and green

If to this 'grocery list ku' we add a preposition and an article we get:

low winter sun
in the raspberry leaves
red and green

It pays to be aware of which two lines you wish to make into the phrase. It helps to read the two lines of a ku which are to become your phrase out loud to see how they sound in your mouth and ears. If there is a too-clear break between the lines, ask yourself if you need an article or an article plus a preposition to be inserted. If you do, forget brevity and allow yourself the lyric pleasure of a smooth shift between these two lines. If I had chosen to make the first line the fragment I would write the ku as:

low winter sun
raspberry leaves glow
red and green

Adding a verb gives the proper grammatical flow between lines two and three. If one added 'in the' to the first line, the ku would read as 'in the low winter sun raspberry leaves glow red and green' which, to my ears would be a run-on sentence.

One other variation on this subject is the haiku in which the break occurs in the middle of the second line. Often one finds this in translations of Basho's haikai taken out of context from a renga. Basically you have a two-liner set into three lines. Occasionally one will find an English haiku written in this manner. Again, it is often 'rescued' out of a renga or written by people using 5-7-5 syllable count who end up with too many images as in this example from *Borrowed Water* edited by Helen Chenoweth in 1966 who wrote:

*A cricket disturbed
the sleeping child; on the porch
a man smoked and smiled.*

If the comment above sounds too critical of the use of the break in the middle of the second line, let me add that this method becomes very interesting if one is working with parallels. Perhaps that is what Helen was noticing - the difference between the sleeping child and man on the porch. Parallels were learned by the Japanese from the Chinese and often used successfully in haiku and tanka.

Those persons using punctuation in their ku, will often find themselves making a dash after the fragment and hopefully nothing, not even a comma in the middle of the phrase, even if there is a breath of the possibility of one. Sometimes, the haiku sounds like a run-on sentence because the author is too lazy to rewrite the fragment clearly and thus, *has* to add a dash forcing the reader into the obligatory break.

For me, this is a red flag that the writer either did not believe in the "haiku has two parts" rule or didn't stay with the rewrite long enough to solve the problem properly. Frankly, I see most punctuation as a cop-out. Almost any ku written as

a run-on sentence (with or without its dash) can be rewritten so that the grammar syntax forms the proper breaks. Or the author forms places where the reader can decide where to make the break and thus, give the haiku additional meaning. From this philosophy, I view haiku with punctuation as haiku which perhaps fail to fit this basic form. Some writers, unable, or unwilling to understand the use of fragment and phrase will write the ku in one line. If the author has a well developed feeling for fragment and phrase, the grammar will expose which is which. In these cases, my feeling is - why not write the ku in the three lines it 'shows' by the way it sounds.

Occasionally a haiku is written that is so full of possible divisions into what is the fragment or the phrase that writing it in one line is the only way that offers the reader the complete freedom to find the breaks. And with each new arrangement the meaning of the poem varies. An example would be:

mountain heart in the stone mountain tunnel light

Over the years I gradually gave up (and easily abandoned) the dashes, semi-colons, commas and periods in order to incorporate ambiguity in the ku, but it has been hard for me to let go of the question mark - which is rather silly, as it is so clear from the grammar that a question is being asked. Still, and yet . . . I mention this, so new-comers to haiku understand that rules are not written in stone, but something each of us has to work out for ourselves. It is an on-going job and one I hope will never end.

The usual way we find new 'rules' is by reading the work of others and deciding for ourselves what works as a ku or what we admire. Consciously or unconsciously we begin to imitate the style that 'rule' creates. Usually we stay with a 'rule' until we find a new one to replace it. Because there are so many rules, we all have different set with which we are working. By carefully reading a magazine like Frogpond, you can see which 'rules' the editor is accepting by the haiku printed. That does not mean 'this' is the only way to write a haiku.

You need to make the decision: are those a rules, goals or guidelines some I want for myself? This thought is much more gentle to the Universe than saying some haiku are good and others are bad.

There is, thank goodness, no one way to write a haiku. Though the literature has haiku which we admire and even model our own works on, there is no one style or technique which is absolutely the best. Haiku is too large for that. Haiku has, in its short history been explored and expanded by writers so that now we have a fairly wide range of styles, techniques and methods to investigate.

Personally, I would prefer more discussions of these techniques using riddles, associations, contrasts, oneness, sense-switching, narrowing focus, metaphor and simile (yes! judiciously and in moderation), sketch (Shiki's *shasei*), double entendre, close linkage, leap linkage, pure objectivism, and more, rather than the

mysterious idea that if one has a true haiku moment the resulting ku will be an excellent haiku. This is pure rot. The experience is necessary and valid (and probably the best part of the haiku path), but writing is writing is skill and a craft to be learned.

Techniques are methods of achieving a known goal in writing. They are something to learn and then forget as Basho has already told us. But once you learn them you will understand why some haiku 'work' for you and others do not. It also prepares you to instinctively use the best technique for each of your haiku experiences.

Perhaps, nothing is absolute in haiku. Like life, haiku require learning, experience and balance. I hope today you have learned a bit more of one technique - the use of fragment and phrase. Blessed Be!