

# To Laugh or To Cry

by Janice Bostok

A few years ago there was a television commercial in Australia which went something like this. A woman is looking at half a glass of milk. She says: "I like to believe the glass is half full." As opposed, of course, to it being half empty. This, I believe, is the best philosophy for any artist, whether we are talking about haiku or other forms of creative expression. We should try to accept life with a positive and cheerful approach.

Through humour in any creative expression we can see the positive side of human nature. Humour is a way of coping with the day-to-day problems of the human condition, and when done with dignity, and care for others, it can actually lift our spirits. The fact that we find humour at any time in our condition, and give it as a gift to others (through haiku), helps us to rationalise the problems and perhaps even begin to solve them — if only by the recognition of them.

The first Japanese gentleman that I had the privilege to meet immediately asked me how I had become interested in haiku (knowing that I was Australian). I answered that I had no idea, because on both sides of my family my ancestors were of Irish descent. He laughed, brought his index fingers tightly together and said: 'Ah! The Irish and the Japanese are like that!' Meaning very close. I believe their humour is similar!

My family has always been resilient and I believe this is because of our wonderful heritage of Irish humour. If we became upset or depressed we could always be "jollied" out of it. My mother would say I was "dragging my coat-tail", if I was cranky. This was her "very Irish" uncle's way of saying someone was looking for a fight. It only had to be explained to me once, that if I was dragging my coat-tail, I was also waiting for some unsuspecting person to step on it so I could get angry at them! From then on she only

had to say that I was dragging my coat-tail and I would laugh, breaking out of my mood.  
I sometimes feel very close to Issa!

**Rainy afternoon ...**

**little daughter you will never**

**teach that cat to dance**

I have never forgotten reading this wonderful haiku, though one doesn't see it very often.

I must say that humour in haiku is not the same as the outlandish belly-laugh, nor the punned groan which we get from senryu. Senryu often seems to me to be contrived. A contrast, an irony, it is set up. It does not appear to come to the reader naturally. I don't particularly want to get into discussing the differences between the two, but there sometimes seems to be some misunderstanding as to what senryu really is.

In the Fall 1998 issue of *Modern Haiku*, J.P. Trammell wrote an interesting review of the *Red Moon Anthology*. He particularly questioned the distinction drawn between haiku and senryu. The choice seemed to be autocratic. Any poem which has a seasonal reference is haiku, and any poem which does not is classed as senryu. I disagree with this division. The two poems which J.P. Trammell chose to make his point were:

haiku

**New Year's dragon**

**dancing down the street**

**with feet of men**

Patricia Neubauer

senryu

**alone ...**

**standing in the mirror**

**touching the lump**

Marc Thompson

I believe they are both haiku. Patricia Neubauer's poem is a humorous haiku with a seasonal reference (New Year). Marc Thompson's poem is too profoundly felt to be dismissed as senryu. There is nothing funny about this poem, there is no reason to laugh at our fellow human here.

We laugh at senryu because it shows up our human foibles and weaknesses. We know we've behaved in the same way, or seen the same behaviour, many times before. We laugh in recognition, keeping our fingers crossed that it won't happen to us! We are boisterous because of our, often embarrassing, reaction to the poem. The images are fleeting, because we don't wish to dwell on our foolishness. Unlike haiku we often can't return to senryu over and over again. They do not have the depth to stand the test of time.

On the other hand the humour in haiku is gentle, felt with compassion, yet still amuses. My favourite Japanese haiku, which shows us the suchness of things through great humour is by Horo (translation by R.H. Blyth):

**the waters of spring**

**the cat fails**

**to jump over it**

Many amusing haiku are written about animals. I am also guilty of doing so!

**slippery floor the dog snorts at a click beetle**

Any piece of creative writing is a story telling. If we think of the stand-up comic we understand that there is a punch line and the delivery must be perfectly timed. This parallel is now being seen in performance poetry when delivered by a good performance poet.

The Zen idea of the “kick in the head” of haiku can be explained as a well-delivered punch line. The juxtaposition of the images, even the visual placement on the page is all related to its visual and spoken success.

Increasingly, the norm for haiku in the West (in English) seems to be a change in the balance of subject matter. Long ago haiku was expected to be two images of nature, in juxtaposition. Then it became nature joined to human nature. Now a very profound feeling can be had by the juxtaposition of human to human concerns. I think this tends to allow for more humour.

Humour is one of our better human qualities: To be able to laugh at ourselves brings all things down to (or raises them up to) a level where we can cope and begin to understand ourselves. If you go back to the old masters, particularly those who also created haiga, humour was very much a part of their art. The paintings were expected to be a little off the wall, as we might say today. They were a little quirky. It is true, some think this is because the painting was done by a poet and not a master painter, but haiga were supposed to make one smile.

The acceptance of humour in haiku is all in the treatment of the subject. Anything can be written about if treated with dignity and with care, so as not to hurt or offend others.

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Janice Bostok lived in Murwillumbah in New South Wales, Australia and wrote haiku for 30 years. She was a founding editor of the *paper wasp* haiku journal and was patron of Haiku Oz, the Australian Haiku Society. Read more of Janice’s work on [her website](#) (still available at the end of 2016). Her last book was *Stepping Stones*, an “extended haibun” about her experiences as mother of a handicapped son. Jan died in September 2011. [Read more about her life.](#)