

# Basho's Haikus and Vocabulary

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## Section Objectives:

- Understand cause/effect relationships; evaluate arguments; visualize details from literature
- Analyze elements of style including diction, figurative language, tone, imagery, and mood
- Understand Greek and Latin prefixes and suffixes; denotation and connotation
- Use context clues
- Selected haikus by Matsuo Basho

## *Introduction to Matsuo Basho and the Haiku*



A statue of Basho

Haiku in Japanese are usually printed in a single vertical line. Haiku in English usually appear in three lines, one for each metrical line of Japanese haiku.

Matsuo Basho is considered to be the master of the short poetic form of haiku and a definitive figure for this simple Japanese art. This skilled poet learned the craft at a very young age as a servant, and quickly gained notability during his early adulthood. Little is known about his early years in servitude, but what is known is that he published his first poetry at the age of eighteen, forever defining him as a great Japanese poet. When his master died, Basho rejected the possibility of becoming a samurai and left his home, struggling with the idea of becoming a full-time poet. Regardless of his inner conflicts, his poetry continued to be published and eventually he decided to truly dedicate his life to his art. Working diligently under the name Tōsei, he gradually gained his fame in Japanese literary circles and began teaching the form to a group of faithful students. These students, or disciples, published a collection of poetry known as *The Best Poems of Tōsei's Twenty Disciples*. Shortly after the collection was published, Basho adopted a more seclusive lifestyle, living in a hut constructed by his disciples.

Tragedy took its toll on Basho when his hut burned down, with his mother's death following closely behind. This naturally led Basho to a deep state of depression, prompting him to practice zen meditation, which seemed to have little effect on his spirits. Even after his disciples built their mentor a second hut, Basho remained in a state of mourning. Shortly after the publication of yet another collection of poetry by one of his disciples, Basho embarked on the first of what would be four dangerous journeys across the Japanese landscape. Many feared that he would perish during his wanderings, but his outlook on life improved and his poetry became more dynamic, reflecting on his new observations. When he returned from his journey, he resumed his occupation as a teacher, but it was not long before he left once again. The second time he took a student along with him, and the journey proved to be another great inspiration for a collection of poetry entitled *The Narrow Road to the Back Country*. Even though it is considered one of his greatest collections, it would not be published until 1702, seven years after his death. Basho died of a stomach illness while on his fourth journey. The last haiku he wrote reads, "falling sick on a journey / my dream goes wandering / over a field of dried grass."



Basho's grave in Otsu

### *Reading Matsuo Basho's Haikus*

Haikus are poems typically composed of three lines and contain seventeen syllables, following the pattern of five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. You will notice that many of the following poems do not follow this pattern. The reason for this is that Basho wrote his poetry in Japanese, which is a language that has a much different syllable system than English. Regardless, the translated versions of these poems do not take away from the meaning behind them. Haikus are essentially brief, yet profound, observations made by the poet, and oftentimes deal with the theme of nature. These pieces are compact poems that express what the speaker experiences in the world that surrounds him.

As you read these short poems, take time to appreciate the images that they evoke. Read

each poem slowly and carefully, paying close attention to the words that Basho uses to describe his observations. Allow each poem to stand on its own, and reread them until you fully understand what is being said. Notice the simplicity of Basho's style. One such poem that exemplifies this simplicity is the haiku describing a snail climbing up Mount Fuji. Notice the word choice, or **diction** in this poem. Some may dismiss this form of poetry as merely expressions of trivial observations, but the true ingenuity behind this form is in the way the poet uses simple language to convey a vivid image. The word "slowly" in itself evokes an image of stalled, lingering time, especially when repeated a second time. Try reading the poetry aloud, clearly enunciating the words and altering your tone of voice and the pace at which you read. Read the word "slowly" at a slow pace, visualizing the snail slowly climbing the mountain.

Some of these poems use **figurative language** to convey a deeper meaning behind the writing. This technique involves using words to represent something beyond what their literal meanings are. For example, the haiku that begins with the line reading, "Sleep on hore-seback" uses figurative language to perhaps express the poet's observation of something metaphysical. The image of the "continuing dream" is most likely not to be taken literally. See how many uses of figurative language you can find in Basho's poetry, and come to your own conclusions as to what the true meanings are behind his words.

Try to determine the poet's **tone**, or attitude, towards his subject matter. Does he like what he sees? Do any of his experiences evoke fear? Tone can be determined by examining the word choice that is used to portray certain images. What is the overall **mood** of the poem? How do you as a reader feel after reading the short piece? Do you agree with Basho's attitudes towards what he experiences, or do you experience similar occurrences differently?

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## Vocabulary

Even though haikus are typically written in simple language, you may encounter words that you do not immediately understand. It is helpful to determine what the Greek and Latin roots are of these words, as you can draw connections to words that you are familiar with. You should also analyze words in terms of their **connotations**, which are secondary meanings to words, and **denotations**, which are specific meanings. Words may have numerous meanings, but analyzing a word's **context** will narrow down the possibilities.

