

NEW WINE FROM OLD

In all things there are cycles. Excellence is followed by downward tendencies. Given that really good poetry is rare in any environment, after the death in 1694 of master haiku poet, Basho, the early 18th century was rife with trivial outpourings by his disciples and their followers. Those dedicated to the high standards Basho brought to haiku decried works like these:

Yellow and white chrysanthemums;
Would that there were no other names.

Ransetsu (1660-1707) disciple of Basho ¹

Beads of dew play about
From one grass leaf to another.

Ransetsu (1660-1707) disciple of Basho ²

A winter gale and the hips of a monkey
Which has fallen off the tree.

Kyodai ³

The reins in one hand, he uses a fan
On horseback. What a picturesque sight!

Shirao (1735-1792) ⁴

If butterflies danced through the falling snow,
What a wonderful sight it would be!

O-amaru ⁵

Perchance the wisteria flowers are
The back of the figure of departing Spring.

Kana-jo (Kyorai's wife) early 18th cent. ⁶

Some poets were exasperated by the nature-sentimentality and conventional formulas prevalent in this kind of work. How did they deal with the problem? In the same way many disappointing or deteriorating situations are exposed and commented on: by the use of humor. Ridicule could serve to highlight the poems' failings. Parody was the answer. It made imminently clear how weak these poems had become.

But to understand how they chose to confront the problem, we need to be aware of this fact. Traditionally, the Japanese are in the habit of imitating their master poets. It is considered paying homage to them. *It is not plagiarism as we might suppose.* So these iconoclasts employed this practice -- with a twist. They attacked the very basis of the haiku: its core component, the nature element, which had been sorely abused. They switched the focus completely to get their point across! By introducing a parallel situation featuring *human* matters, these parodies supplied the necessary shock value. Why was it shocking? Because in haiku, man was not supposed to be the dominant subject. If there at all, man is subordinate to the overriding nature theme.

Now let's look at how this works. As with the phrase "departing Spring" in the wisteria poem by Kana-jo, here is another classic seasonal phrase commonly used in haiku: "The year draws to its close." An early 18th century writer, totally frustrated by the *sterility* that plagued haiku at this time, ridicules this familiar nature reference. He cleverly kicks it into a situation that focuses instead on *human* sterility. This parody implies weariness with what was characterizing haiku for too many years:

The love-potion;
Waiting, waiting, for its effect,
The year draws to its close.

Anon. early senryu ⁷

In the words of Dwight Macdonald, 20th century literary and film critic, this is an example of "parody that is making a new wine that tastes like the old but has a slightly lethal effect." ⁸ Next is another example of parody that is a spoof, a lampoon on a well-known Basho classic. It is one that "fools around with the material of high literature and adapts it to low ends." ⁹

A cloud of cherry-blossoms.
A temple bell,--
Is it Uena, is it Asakusa?

Basho ¹⁰

So as not to show
The public lavatory,
A cloud of cherry-blossoms.

Kenkabo (1870-1934) ¹¹

The nightingale, featured in so many Japanese haiku, is noticed in a different manner by Basho's young disciple, Kikaku, in the following famous haiku. He lights upon an uncommon posture to lend delicate humor and originality to his observation:

Head down, the nightingale
Is singing its first song.

Kikaku (1660-1707) ¹²

Later in the 18th century which saw the rise of the senryu, we have the following parody, a wonderfully human portrait deriving from the same poem:

Upside down
She rubs and scours herself
With washing powder.

Anon. senryu (early 18th cent.) ¹³

In this instance, the senryu treats the old haiku with respect and honors it by affectionate imitation as it transfers the topsy-turvy charm to a new and completely human moment. Valuable as the intimate Degas painting of the woman bending over, bathing in a washtub. So we see how these earliest parodies of nature poems opened the way for certain kinds of new expressions that evolved into the wide-ranging senryu of today whose scope has now expanded to include more than parodies alone: It addresses *all* aspects of human experience. And most new senryu stand on their own as a poem without dependence on prior works for their impact.

Odd and unpredictable as things tend to be, the major benefit resulting from the use of parody to clean up haiku's act in the early 18th century is that the new direction taken exceeded its original purpose. Yet there is one common mistake needs to be stressed: Because these parodies contain a reference to nature, many poets still presume them to be haiku. *That is simply not so.* Such parodies of haiku have taken the nature reference to entirely different ends. In doing so, they became the basis for a whole new genre: the senryu.

In all fairness , it needs to be stated that over a century of senryu’s huge popularity in Japan which resulted in anthologies devoted solely to them, senryu, too, experienced cycles of high quality followed by deterioration akin to that of the haiku. But by the end of the 20th century, senryu became fully appreciated and it flourishes in the hands of some of the best English-language haiku poets. They began to create gutsy, realistic, sometimes poignant ones, and hilarious ones featuring aspects of human nature that still bring us refreshing entertainment as well as piercing insights. There is great fun to be had when contemporary poets take a witty stab to create perfect parodies of new haiku and senryu using satiric or ironic imitation and word-play. Alan Pizzarelli deftly flips Nicholas Virgilio’s classic haiku, “Lily:/ out of the water--/out of itself.” into an equally classic senryu “Lily:/ out of the water--/out of her suit.”



NOTE: This essay was originally written for *Haiku Chronicles* episode #27 “PARODIES” (2013). Though I cite only one parody here, examples of all kinds are at the podcast.

1. Miyamori, A. , *Anthology of Haiku Ancient & Modern*, 1932, p. 272.
2. Miyamori, A. , *Ibid.*, p. 267.
3. Miyamori, A., *op. cit.*, p. 501.
4. Miyamori, A., *op. cit.*, p. 505.
5. Miyamori, A. , *op.cit.*, p 563.
6. Miyamori, A., *op.cit.*, p. 418.
7. Blyth, R.H. , *Japanese Life & Character in Senryu* , Hokuseido , 1960, p. 37.
8. Macdonald, Dwight, *Parodies*, Random House, 1960. p. 559.
9. Gross, John, *Oxford Book of Parodies*, p. xi.
10. Blyth, R. H., *Ibid.*, p. 447.
11. Blyth, R. H., *op. cit.*, p. 446.
12. Miyamori, A., *op. cit.*, p. 253.
13. Blyth, R. H., *JL&CS, op. cit.*, p.31.

