

## Using Season Words in Senryu

or “Where did I put my kigo?”

*by Roberta Beary*

Do season words have any place in senryu? By senryu, I mean short poems about human nature, which may or may not have a season word. Some poets would argue that senryu cannot have season references. Others talk about traditional haiku, with season words, and non-traditional haiku, without season words and do not even bother with the term senryu. Still others are adamant that the use of season words automatically renders a senryu a haiku. To get this discussion started, I want to talk about some examples of senryu from The Haiku Society of America’s yearly award for senryu, known as the Gerald Brady Memorial Award (“Brady”). In looking at the winners of Brady over the past several years, it appears that the use of season words is not a de facto disqualification. First and foremost, each of the Brady senryu deals with an aspect of human nature.

In Elizabeth St. Jacques’ 1995 HM, the yard sale is usually a summer event, but the main feeling of the haiku is the sense of nostalgia for child-

bearing years.

yard sale:

she takes the baby crib

back into the house

(Elizabeth St. Jacques 1995 HM)<sup>1</sup>

The next senryu has two season references, nudist camp and sunblock.  
Both set the stage for poet Stefanac's humorous dilemma.

nudist camp

where to begin

with the sunblock

(R.A. Stefanac 2003 3<sup>rd</sup> Place)<sup>2</sup>

Billie Wilson's 1<sup>st</sup> Place winning poem juxtaposes two separate seasonal images quite effectively, freezing wind and muscle shirt, to convey the vanity of the body builder.

freezing wind –  
the body builder pumps gas  
in a muscle shirt

(Billie Wilson 2001 1<sup>st</sup> Place)<sup>3</sup>

In John Stevenson's well known senryu, the season words, "Christmas Day" evoke a festive image which adds to the power of the exchange of children rather than the expected gifts.

Christmas Day  
the exchange  
of custody

(John Stevenson 1996 HM)<sup>4</sup>

In the final senryu, Carl Patrick's sense of wonderment at the number of fireflies gives way to the very human emotion of envy.

fireflies  
my neighbor

has more

(Carl Patrick 1999 1<sup>st</sup> Place)<sup>5</sup>

In a discussion with Carl Patrick about his Brady senryu, he admitted that he did not distinguish between his poem being a haiku or a senryu. However, the fact that he did enter it in a senryu contest does indicate that he made the distinction. In looking more closely, we see that the poem is about his envy of his neighbor, rather than the beauty of fireflies.

Where does this place us? In reading over the above Brady award senryu, I would argue that the use of season words has made each senryu stronger. But is this a hard and fast rule? Must an effective senryu have a seasonal reference? The short answer is that it is up to the poet to decide if a season word in the senryu will make the poem more effective. For myself, I let the feeling of the poem guide me.

In this senryu, I wanted to suggest a feeling a cabin fever, underscored by the dog's incessant movement:

snowed in

the dog clicks  
from room to room<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, senryu are weakened by the use of season words. In writing about my father's death, I felt that the use of a season word would be an unnecessary affectation. For this reason, my "death" senryu are "season-less."

funeral home  
here too she straightens  
his tie<sup>7</sup>

funeral mass  
my sister's hat  
blocks the view<sup>8</sup>

In both senryu, there is no indication of the time of year. There is no season or month. I wanted to convey the sense that time is standing still. I think both poems would be weaker were they to include a season word. "my sister's straw hat," for example, adds nothing to the second senryu. In my "season-less" senryu, even when there is an appearance of a season

word, it is used in a way that does not allow the reader to pinpoint the date:

day moon

we windowshop

caskets<sup>9</sup>

A "day moon" can occur at any time of year. The job of window shopping caskets with a family member is as odd as seeing a moon in the day time.

Where does this leave us on the use of season words in senryu or “where did I put my kigo”? We have seen that senryu can be weakened by unnecessary season words that distract from the human element of the poem. The Brady winners show us that season words can strengthen the senryu. The season word can be used to contrast, emphasize or color the main point of the senryu. So put your kigo in a place that is close by. You never know, you just might need it.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/bradyawards/brady.htm>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> HM 2005 International Poetry contest, Palomar Branch, National League of American Pen Women; *The Haiku Calendar 2006*, Liverpool, England: Snapshot Press, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Modern Haiku*, 37:1, winter-spring 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *frogpond*, XXXI:I winter 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *NOON* 5