



Reconnecting with Nature through Haiku

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Abstract

This reflection outlines how haiku can be used as a creative form of writing to help students reconnect with nature, raise climate and environmental awareness, and promote change. It is based on a teaching experience described in more detail in the chapter “Raising Environmental Awareness and Rewriting Education through Haikus,” written by Lorraine Kerlake and M^a Encarnación Carillo and published in [Literature as a Lens for Climate Change: Using Narratives to Prepare the Next Generation](#) (Rowman & Littlefield 2022, pp. 171-193).

Keywords

[poetry](#), [haiku](#), [nature](#), [environmental awareness](#)

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We live in a culture that is profoundly and systemically [anthropocentric](#). This dominant culture considers humankind as superior to nature and other animals. It is guided by the assumption that it is only in relation to humans that anything else has value.

Now, more than ever, imagination is key in envisioning change and rethinking the way we interact with the world around us. The climate and ecological emergencies expressed in the multiplicity of interconnected phenomena—[global warming](#), [water pollution](#), [deforestation](#), [biodiversity loss](#), and others—are part of a broader problem, one deeply connected to our dysfunctional, anthropocentric relationship with nature.

Language is a human construct. It is largely aligned with culture and often positioned against nature, affirming humanity as an entity separate from the rest of nature. If so, how can we use language to rewrite the world? Or to reimagine the relation between the human and non-human world? Specifically, as educators, how can we promote forms of critical thinking that raise

[environmental and climate awareness](#)? How do we encourage students to relate and identify with the world around them? Using the classroom as a place for climate literacy conversations is one way to start.

The integration of climate issues in the classroom can contribute to developing a more humanistic way of understanding and interacting with the world. From primary to tertiary education, literature is listed in the curriculum as one of the tools for the successful implementation of sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and emotional aspects of teaching. As educators, we face the challenge of creating spaces for helping our students learn to use language as a tool to recognize the embeddedness of humans in nature. In this context poetry can be a particularly useful tool to foster environmental and climate awareness.

Poetry is a unique and complex form of language. In most education contexts since the 1990s, teaching poetry has often been stigmatized as unnecessary, lacking practical purpose or value that matters in real life. Unsurprisingly, at least in our experience, poetry is the genre that students seem least comfortable with. One way to introduce students to the power of poetry and connect it to climate literacy is to show them that they can become poets for a day. Because poetry, especially its format called haiku, has unique affordances to reconnect students to the wonder of nature.

A haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry inspired by nature. A haiku poem includes three lines with a set syllable pattern, in which the first and last lines have five syllables, and the middle line has seven. The simplicity of its seventeen syllables, condensed in haiku's 5-7-5 pattern, works as a structure around which a thought is written in an inspired moment. Rather than communicate what to think and feel, haiku poems stress particular importance of the here and now. Take Basho's "frog" poem:

An old pond;
a frog jumps in –
the sound of the water.

What makes this haiku interesting is not the fact that Basho was the first to describe a frog but how the poem appreciates the sound of the frog jumping into the water, making the episode come alive before the eyes of the poet and the reader.

The appreciation of the ordinary and the emphasis on the present moment allows haiku poems to capture and imagine events from a participatory point of view. This being with, the act of empathy and the ability to identify with the other, is also key to creating a more caring relationship with nature. The visual image that is conceived when reading and writing haiku can help develop environmental awareness and climate literacy while learning a language that brings one closer to [nature](#).

Among teachers who use haiku, one practical challenge is whether to insist on the use of traditional conventions, including a strict syllable count of seventeen syllables: 5-7-5. Although this convention should not be deemed rigid, students can be encouraged to respect the traditional haiku format together with three other “golden rules” as guidelines about what a haiku should do:

- capture the essence of a moment in time: a sort of poetic photo snapshot.
- find the extraordinary in the ordinary: imagine you are looking at nature for the first time.
- reconnect our world to nature.

A simple way to do this is to invite students to choose a topic related to a particular element of nature. It could be a season, a particular ecosystem, or larger environment: the sea, the mountains, whatever comes to mind. Close your eyes, feel what surrounds you. Sense it. Smell it. Breathe it. Feel it. *Become* it. Then brainstorm words related to the theme. Try to write down the number of syllables next to each word. This is the basis of your haiku. Now you are ready to draft it.

Given its brevity and evocative imagery, writing haiku can be a successful way to encourage students’ creativity. Being only three lines long, a haiku is an easy and effective way to show the power of poetry even in a short class activity. It can be a particularly useful tool for students to express their thoughts and emotions freely and creatively, regardless of their age and level.

In our experience, haiku poems often serve as an emotional outlet for students to reflect on their own feelings whilst connecting them to nature. Given the inherent anthropocentrism of Western culture, these connections can also nurture deeper ones that, in turn, foster a critical awareness of the myriad systems that shape all forms of life on Earth.

The main purpose of reading and writing haiku is sharing moments of our lives and experiences that have moved us. On the deepest level, this is surely one of the greatest purposes of all art, not just poetry. Haiku can be implemented in the classroom at all grade levels as an approach to creative writing and an effective way to encourage students to use language as a form of connection between their inner selves and the natural world. Writing haiku poems can contribute toward a more thoughtful appraisal of the role humans play in the world. It can help change our attitudes and move us beyond the present crisis toward a more sustainable way of being with Earth.