

TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

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CONTEMPORARY *TANKA* POEMS ON DEATH

Today, we would like to talk about *tanka*, a form of poetry unique to Japan, particularly about modern *tanka* dealing with death.

First, we will explain what *tanka* is. *Tanka* is a form of poetry unique to Japan, composed of 31 syllables (5, 7, 5, 7, 7). This form of poetry was known as *waka* before the modern era. However, *waka* and *tanka* are different.

Before the modern era, *waka* poetry was largely conventional, focusing on tradition, harmony, and techniques within the poem or rules for doing so, as *waka* poems were sometimes sent by people to each other as a form of greeting.

The content of *waka* poems was often about the seasonal atmosphere, romantic feelings, or one's love situation. In contrast, the modern form of poetry is called *tanka*, which is distinct from *waka*. *Tanka* must emphasize the rules, traditions, and techniques necessary in *waka*.

Modern *tanka* is free in theme and content and can be written about anything. Some *tanka* are just short sentences that ignore the poem's rhythm, while others are rhythmical and playful. There are no restrictions beyond the word count, and modern *tanka*'s main feature and attraction are that it is relatively free and accessible compared to traditional *waka* poetry. Some such modern *tankas* are introduced below.

「この味がいいね」と君が言ったから 七月六日はサラダ記念日
'Because you said, "I like this taste," 6 July is Salad Anniversary.'

This is a simple *tanka* about a slight chance to commemorate an ordinary day in your life so you can feel the warmth of daily life. Modern *tanka* has a freedom and flexibility to express anything as a *tanka* in this way.

ただのものあなたにはぼくだけだものだけだものぼくだけだものだ
'Only for you, only for me, only for me, only for you, only for you, only for me, only for you, only for you.'

This *tanka* emphasizes rhythm and a repetition of sounds rather than content. Of course, it is easier to understand when it is said aloud, but it is a delightful *tanka* with its repeated string of letters and the rhythm of the words. *Tanka* which incorporates this kind of exciting play on words is one of the charms of modern *tanka*.

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In addition to *tanka*, there is another form of Japanese poem which is commonly known as *haiku* (*hokku*). Although *haiku* and *tanka* seem very similar, they are very different. The differences between *haiku* and *tanka* are explained below.

Firstly, *haiku* overlaps with *tanka* in that it has its rhythm, as it has 17 syllables (5, 7, 5), but *tanka* can express more things using more characters.

Secondly, *haiku* must incorporate seasonal words, known as *kigo*, into the structure. On the other hand, *tanka* has no rules on the kind of words which are used, so it is freer to express seasons, feelings, and so on. One can say that *tanka* has a broader range of themes because it does not have to have seasonal elements.

For comparison, here is one modern *haiku*.

チューリップ 喜びだけを 持っている
'Tulips, I have only joy.'

This *haiku* describes how beautiful tulips that blossom in spring are as if they have only joy. Compared to the previous poem, 'Because you said, "I like the taste," 6 July is Salad Anniversary,' both have a rhythm. Still, the *haiku* is shorter and differs from the *tanka* in that it shows the season's beauty to a greater extent.

Thus, *haiku* and *tanka* have their own merits and cannot be ranked superior or inferior, but significant differences between them can be seen.

Modern *tanka* can also be classified into different categories due to their free form. Tatsuya Kinoshita, the first named contemporary *tanka* poet, classifies them into three types according to the impression the reader receives such as 'empathy,' 'conviction,' and 'wonder.'

'Empathic' *tanka* is where a reader can strongly empathize with emotions and circumstances described in the poem, saying to him/herself, "Yes, that's it!" For example:

おばさんでごめんねというほんとうはごめんとかないむしろ敬え

'I say I am sorry I am old. Actually, I am not sorry, rather it would be best if you respected me.'

This *tanka* expresses the conflict of wanting to point out the rude attitude of young people toward an adult woman but pacifying oneself in consideration of the young age of the other person by using the Japanese notation. The conflict between what you want to say and whether you can say it or not has probably been experienced by all of us at least once.

A *tanka* poem with "conviction" is characteristic of a fresh and innovative point of view but is also persuasive enough for anyone to understand, where the reader can give a nod to what the poem is saying, even though they may not have noticed it before. For example, the *tanka* 'We laughed at each other's glasses as if we were stealing each other's world' describes two people exchanging glasses as stealing each other's world.

Seeing the world through the lens that another person typically uses to perceive the world is fascinating to describe as stealing the other person's world. However, it is a fresh way of describing exchanging glasses as stealing the world from each other.

The *tanka* of "wonder" is a type of *tanka* with such originality that it is difficult for everyone to understand, even if they read it several times. For example, 'You like it, the tap. It has three parts that stick out, and they are shining.' This *tanka* captures the tap's characteristics, but it is

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difficult to understand how they lead to ‘like,’ making them challenging to comprehend fully.

So essentially, most *tanka* fall into one of the three categories listed above, although the classification may change somewhat depending on the poets and readers. As is clear from the above classification of *tanka*, the poet perceives the world from a comprehensive perspective. Even small events, acts, and feelings are seen from perspectives we do not often think of, and the reader receives various impressions from them. The variety of viewpoints can also be seen in multiple *tanka* poems on the same theme. This is one of the essential characteristics and attractions of *tanka* poetry.

To illustrate this, we will give one example: a *tanka* dealing with the theme of death.

What are your thoughts on death? What do you think death is like? Is it sad? Does it come one day? Is it going to another world? To illustrate this, here are some *tanka* poems about different kinds of death written by other poets.

The first is a *tanka* poem,

死は急にくるかゆつくりくるものか心わくわくするにあらねど

You never know whether death is something that comes suddenly or slowly although you don't get excited anyway.'

In this *tanka*, death is not the goal of a human being's life but approaches us in the middle of life. It also expresses that we do not know when death will come regarding its speed. The poet seems relatively unafraid of death's arrival, although he does not look forward to it. Death is often thought of as always being far away, but in this poem, there is a sense of caution that it may come soon and be classified as a convincing *tanka*.

Next is the *tanka* poem about the death of a family member:

もう二度と死ななくてよい安らぎに見つめてみたり祖母の寝顔を

'I gaze at my grandmother's sleeping face in peace that she will never have to die again.'

This *tanka* is interpreted as looking at the sleeping face of a grandmother who has gone to her eternal rest and being reassured that she has already died, which means that she will never have to die again. In this *tanka* we can see the limited nature of death, so to speak, that death comes only once to every human being, no matter how many others have died. This is also an interesting point of view. It emphasizes that no matter how often you lose people around you, death is really close to you only once.

What about this other example of a *tanka* poem?

死期を知り避けむともがき結局は死んでしまった男のはなし

'Here is a story about a man who knew his time of death and tried to avoid it but eventually died.'

It is a common sight to wish not to die even though you know your time of death and understand that there is nothing you can do about it. This is probably the way many people face death in dramas. In this *tanka*, death is represented as something people want to avoid. It

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may be intensely colored as a *tanka* of sympathy. Alternatively, the poet may have composed the poem because he thought seeing such a man objectively trying to resist death was funny. Either way, the poem also focuses on the finality and cruelty of death, which in the end is unavoidable.

Here is another example of a *tanka* poem:

会った人が死んでしまうということをなんか思ったコンビニのレジ

‘The cash register at the convenience store where I thought somehow about the fact that a person I met would die.’

This *tanka* poem describes how the strangers who come to the cash register of the convenience store where she works subconsciously realize that they will all one day follow the same path of death. What is being depicted here is the equality of death. It may also be that seeing each person’s face with actual concreteness makes the death of another person, ‘someone dying,’ seem more familiar to them.

Finally, let us examine the *tanka* poem ‘Rainbow, do the buried goldfish see the other half of the ring buried in the ground?’ This *tanka* poem reminds us that the rainbow is in the shape of a circle and that the other half-ring, which has not appeared above ground, may be seen by the dead lying buried in the ground. People often say they become stars or go to the sky when they die. Still, this particular *tanka* primarily reflects the poet’s view of death, that the dead have always been sleeping in the ground and that they are not going to the other world, another world, or a faraway place but will always be in the world where they can see the same rainbow. One can say this is a *tanka* of conviction.

In this paper, we have highlighted five *tanka* poems dealing with death. Even though they all deal with the same theme of death, each poet has his or her point of view, style, and way of perceiving death, and we can even see the poet’s picture of life and death and their way of life in the very 31 syllables. This is also a result of the fact that each poet has a different point of view on a single thing.

Another characteristic of *tanka* poetry is that it often focuses on a single aspect of a theme or a single thing out of the many facets of that theme. One of the main characteristics of *tanka* is that we can gain multiple perspectives on a theme from reading *tanka* poems.

To conclude, we have described the breadth and characteristics of *tanka* poetry by comparing it with *haiku* and *waka* poetry. In addition, we also presented several *tanka* poems on ‘death’ and touched upon the multifaceted nature of a single theme and the breadth of the poet’s viewpoints. In essence, we can explore ways of dealing with multiple things from today’s *tanka*.

References:

Kinoshita T. (2016). *Tanka Lessons by Genius for Ordinary People*. Tokyo: Nanarokusha. Tanka of Death BOT (https://twitter.com/shi_no_tanka) last viewed 16 Dec 2022.