

DEFINING TANKA

by Denis M. Garrison, Editor, *Modern English Tanka*

“Tanka” (which is both singular and plural) is an untitled and unrhymed quintain.

[In English poetry, “quintains” are five-line verse units, rhymed or unrhymed, of various meters and forms, or unmetred free verse. Quintains are usually heterometrical, but isometrical quintains are possible, e.g., blank verse.]

DEFINING THE FORM There is no agreement, in tanka written in English, on a set form. Nevertheless, there are plenty of opinions on set form, some held fervently.

The set form most often cited is that based on syllable-counting (5, 7, 5, 7, 7, on each line in succession), resulting in a total 31-syllable length for the poem. Few modern English tanka poets consider this most strict form to be required for proper tanka in English. A few do follow this form strictly; many follow it occasionally; a few make a point to never use it. One must note that following the strict form results in poems that are longer, when read, than the original Japanese tanka on which they are modeled.

A looser tanka form is the truncation of the 31-syllable length such that one, several, or all five lines are shorter than their formally prescribed lengths. This is generally known as the “short-long-short-long-long” definition. In my estimation, more poets in English follow this looser form than the strict 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 form.

Some poets would define tanka even less specifically. Perhaps, most poets . . .

Speaking for myself, although I occasionally write tanka following the set form or the looser form, I do not believe that the relative length of lines need be regulated. In fact, while Japanese tanka are regularly isometrical (different length lines, viz., always a proportion of 1:1.4), an English tanka could be heterometrical (all five lines of the same length). In practice, most tanka in English are irregularly isometrical. Concomitant with that fact, most tanka in English are less than 31 syllables in length, sometimes even less than half that length.

My personal definition of English tanka is that it is “five phrases on five lines.” It is essential that the five phrases be cohesive, not just a list. The five lines must be integrated into a unified poem. The fifth line should be a strong line; the strongest.

PIVOT LINE Pivot lines are a feature of Japanese tanka and are often a feature of English tanka, but not necessarily so. A pivot line, usually line 3, can be read sensibly with lines 1 and 2, and also sensibly with lines 4 and 5, a property which can be used to introduce ambiguity and resonance into the poem. Here is an example of my tanka, published in *Simply Haiku*, May 2006.

the brief cloud of snow
as an axe strikes this oak
a staggering blow
after his diagnosis
I can't hear the doctor's voice

Note how “a staggering blow” reads with lines 1 and 2 (the blow of an axe), and how it reads with lines 4 and 5 (the blow of bad news).

HAIKU & COUPLET One method of composing tanka is to write what is basically a haiku for lines 1, 2, 3, which deals with a natural subject and then write two more lines to append to that which deal with a human experience in a manner that has metaphorical, symbolic, or other resonance with the haiku. My tanka above was written in that same manner. However, in modern English tanka, a natural-subject haiku connected by a pivot line to a human-subject couplet not only is not a requirement, but probably is not even in the majority of poems written. Neither including an opening haiku nor using a pivot line is essential to the modern English tanka.

MY DEFINITION Back to my personal definition of English tanka. Add to “five phrases on five lines” that use of a pivot line is a very useful (but not mandatory) technique. The most popular modern Japanese tanka poet, Machi Tawara (“*Salad Anniversary*”) has proposed two other criteria for tanka that I believe are very useful but still not mandatory. First, she notes that virtually all tanka are written in the first person. Second, she suggests that a tanka cannot convey a whole story, it must be the “middle of the story.” I think that even in English tanka, the majority written are in the first person, whether explicitly or tacitly. The resemblance of tanka to personal journal entries has long been noted. But not all are such, at least in English. Likewise, the “middle of the story” criterion is usually true, but there are poems where it is hardly applicable. Both are good rules of thumb to remember and to use when they will work well.

CONTENT Tanka may be beautifully lyrical poems, often about love, loss, longing, and similar aspects of our emotional lives, sometimes making a connection between some aspect of nature and some aspect of human nature (usually, emotions). We need not limit the subject matter or style of tanka so narrowly. Many styles and subjects have yet to be explored in tanka, and should be. Social criticism surely works in the tanka form, for just one example.

KYOKA There is a category or subset of tanka, satirical tanka called “kyoka.” It means “mad poems.” This is a similar relationship to that of haiku and senryu in some poets’ opinion, making a split between natural and human subjects. Tanka are really mainly about human subjects, so it does not work, in my opinion. I believe that the original kyoka were ‘anti-tanka,’ the flip side of the genre of tanka which cannot exist without true tanka to reflect in a distorted mirror. I surmise that the same process that led to

non-haiku spinoffs, like haiku noir, and accidentally included many senryu, is beginning for tanka with the rising interest in kyoka, per se. However, tanka has a larger palette with a broader spectrum of colors than does haiku and does not need a senryu-like shadow version. I think kyoka, no matter how satirical or rude, are a variety of tanka.

SUMMARY Other than defining English tanka as an untitled, unrhymed quintain, little more can be said without fear of contradiction. We can say that English tanka are free verse insofar as they need not be metrical, but tanka can be written in, e.g., iambic lines. The length is no problem for meter; just consider limericks. We can say that they are lyrical, but very objective, unemotional tanka could be written. Some poets are distressed by the difficulty in defining more specifically the English tanka. I am not. I see it as an artifact of tanka's immensely wide palette, with a broad spectrum of colors, tones, and moods. It seems to me that the simple definition "five phrases on five lines," when modulated by deep study of fine tanka, both Japanese tanka in translation and modern English tanka, by expertise in English poetics generally, and by the proper disposition to write within the tanka tradition, even while stretching its limits with innovation, is enough definition. More mandatory rules would be unduly restrictive on poetic creativity and innovation. In another context, I have written: "*It is a delicate balance that one must strike. One must not discard the past in ignorance, but one also must not be constrained by the past. One must assiduously study the rules of poetics and then ignore them. The rules of poetics are not for writing the poem; the rules are for forming the craft of the poet. Every time a poet puts pen to paper, poetry is reinvented - or should be!*"

Now, do you know the definition of English tanka? NO! But you do know my definition of it, and you have a fair summary of some other prevailing opinions on tanka's definition. So, now you have enough context to begin your own studies, to begin forming the only opinion that ultimately matters—your own.

— *Denis M. Garrison*

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