

Creating Twitku: Capturing the Present Moment With Short Existential Poems at Twitter.com

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Is Social Media eating away at your life?

No time to do the things you really like? Have you given up writing contemplative poetry like Emerson, Hughes, or Dickinson, or spontaneous verses like the sages of ancient China and Japan?

Is there a way to create a poetic form that blends old ideas of aesthetics and insight with speedy high-tech delivery systems?

Enter Twitku. Twitku is a 21st century cousin of Haiku, the form of Zen poetry that flourished in 18th century Japan and continues to be written today. I created Twitku by literally falling over the concept as I tried to use my Twitter account to post a few short poems on cyberspace. I had no intention to open the door to a Haiku alternative, but such is the nature of this Zennish form of self-expression.

Most readers have heard of Haiku, which developed in Japan before the modern era. The original form was 17 syllables in Chinese or Japanese. A similar, but structurally different form of Haiku has been embraced in the West. It generally follows a three-line form with syllables per line as follows: 5-7-5. One of the key qualities of original Haiku was its ability to distil an event or object to the most essential elements. In some cases, a mere 17 syllables can get at the heart of an experience. Here's an example by Basho (1716-1784), translated by R.H. Blyth with one word substitution by me. (If you count the syllables, they won't reach 17; but assuredly, they do in the original Japanese.)

Old pond. Frog
jumping in the
water—PLOP!

Here's another by Basho's contemporary, Issa (translated by David G. Lanoue):

"The peony was as big as this,"
Says the little girl
Opening her arms.

So, how do we take the fresh immediacy of Haiku—apparent even in translation—and adapt it for the virtual universe. Enter Social Media, in particular, Twitter. Twitter does not impose a syllable limit on writing, but does require a 140-character maximum per entry. This makes it ideal for concise expressions—even explosions—PLOP!—of images, verbal gymnastics, and Zen-like moments of breathless awareness. Without thinking (an appropriate Zen-like mindset), I developed Twitku. Twitku is a poem that is 140 characters or less and is launched through a Twitter account.

Part of the mechanism of a Twitku is its immediacy. It flashes into the universe as fast as Verizon or T-Mobile can carry it, into phones, iPads, computers, and tablets of subscribers around the world. A Twitku is part poem, part "happening." It is inextricably tied to its delivery system. A Twitku in a printed book is just another short poem. Its flashing is its existence. At any given moment, a Twitku may be raising an eyebrow at a train station in Manhattan, causing a scowl on a pig farmer in Wisconsin, or eliciting a chuckle from a housewife in Guam.

Twitku also releases the inner artist by smashing grammatical conventions. Try to fit a 160-character concept into a 140-character tweet! Soon you will be running words together, replacing "and" with "&," and dropping vowels left and right. I wouldn't admire this in a student's term paper, but it can be a liberating device in the poetry-writing process. Take that, Writer's Block!

When I first started tweeting as PoetOfZen at Twitter.com, I didn't realize that what I was doing was creating Twitku. It seemed so natural: Instead of counting 14 lines for a sonnet, or three lines for a Haiku, I found myself composing directly on Twitter and sending Friends poems at or under the 140 character limit.

The more I tweeted, the more Friends I accrued. Soon I was not only tweeting short poems to people I knew, but also to others interested in either poetry or Zen, and even to popular entertainment sites. I soon learned to practice “Twitquette” to avoid embarrassing situations.

- Keep your Twitku Twitter account separate from your “friends and family” Twitter account. An insightful poem about climate change followed by a request that your partner pick up a quart of soy milk is sure to confuse or unduly amuse your Twitku readers. Have a separate Twitter account for personal stuff.
- Be careful what you recommend on other sites. A slip of the finger may send a stupid recommendation to appear on your Twitku-rich Twitter page.
- Follow Twitku ethics: post poetry for illumination, self-expression, sharing with like minds. Do not use Twitku as a means to sell insurance, send hate mail, or try to convert people to a religion.

Twitku developed from a desire for self-expression followed by a yearning for social media immediacy. While Haiku traditionally focuses on the seasons, Twitku speaks to the moment in a uniquely satori-like way. My own Twitku began as nonsense verses or humor (subliminal influences may have been Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll). Here’s an early example:

Carnavore Carnarvon is a cheesy meat-a-holic./When he dies of uric poison,/watch the rescued roasters frolic!

But lately, with more yoga and fewer teaching assignments, I find my short verses taking on a more metaphysical cast:

PRISONER OF ZEN...DUH!--Fine if you're freed by bald head, black robe, stick,/Not if it's the same old bossy dogma schtick!

And

An adage is/ A platitude In monk's clothing

Nature is also a recurring theme in Twitku:

Down in the mud with the turtles today/Watching mayflies and waterbugs play./Thought I was a dragonfly for a sec/Til I landed on my neck.

...as are the challenges of daily life outside:

From under the car, attacking my feet/Tawny, lean, king of the street/Rasping, snarls, but then relief:/I won't get bit; Hello, dead leaf!

...and inside the house:

Electric tiny lights:All night! VCR/DVD/Laptop/Kindle/TV/Bose, all stare into the 3 am.Dark night air! No wonder there's Insomnia & Despair!

Mourning the death of the favored cat, I wrote:

The souls of cats-/Nimble sheaths-/Dissolve into air like/Pipe smoke wreathes;/Seeking height/Whispering past:/Unbowed masters to the last.

These are a few of my own Twitku. I invite other poets, scholars, and warriors of ordinary life to contribute their epiphanies and love of words in the moment, capturing forever in terse, succinct, and lively verse a flash of insight or a fleeting dream. Yes, creating Twitku has bolstered my self esteem: I feel like Mark Zuckerberg, only without the money and guilty conscience. But Twitku is not the product of one person’s quest for poetic expression.

Go ahead: post a poem on Twitter. You are Twitku, too!

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