haiku.

Japanese poets have been creating examples of haiku poetry for hundreds of years. The haiku form got especially popular in the seventeenth century with the rise of the poet Matsuo Bashō, a man who elevated the haiku from a display of wit to a sublime observation on the natural world. He is important enough in Japanese culture to have been declared a saint both by the government and in the Shinto religion. There are several other famous haiku poets, such as Yosa Buson and Kobayashi Issa.

Many famous poets have written haikus, such as Jack Kerouac, Richard Wright, and Ezra Pound. **Not all haikus written in English have exactly seventeen syllables, however. English-language poets recognized that the number of syllables was not the most important nor defining aspect of haiku in Japan.**

Instead, they tried to approximate and employ other **features**, such as: a focus on **imagery** of nature, highlighting a **brief moment** in time, a sense of **enlightenment**, or **revelation** or **intense emotion**, a **lack of superfluous words**, **no**[**rhyme**](http://www.literarydevices.com/rhyme/) scheme, **a lack of**[**simile**](http://www.literarydevices.com/simile/)**and**[**metaphor**](http://www.literarydevices.com/metaphor/), **a lack of much capitalization or punctuation**, and a **juxtaposition** between two things. This juxtaposition could be between something large and something small, some organic and something manmade, etc.

**Examples of Haiku in Literature**

**Example #1**

An old pond!  
A frog jumps in—  
the sound of water.

(By Matsuo Bashō)

*This is perhaps the best-known haiku example of all time. It is by the poet Matsuo Bashō, the most revered creator of haiku poetry. This poem excellently and succinctly includes all important elements of a haiku: natural imagery, a juxtaposition between stillness and movement, and the correct number of on. This English translation does not use seventeen syllables in order to parallel the more important aspect of brevity. The image of the frog is one of acknowledged ways of symbolizing spring.*

**Example #2**

O snail  
Climb Mount Fuji,  
But slowly, slowly!

(By Kobayashi Issa)

*Kobayashi Issa was another famous haiku poet. This poem has been incorporated into modern culture in a few ways; J.D. Salinger quoted it in his novel Franny and Zoey, while also giving the title to a Russian novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsy (translated into English as Snail on the Slope). It is an effective poem by evoking natural imagery and juxtaposing the very small—a snail—with the enormously large—Mount Fuji.*

**Example #3**

lend me your arms,  
fast as thunderbolts,  
for a pillow on my journey.

(By Hendrik Doeff)

*Hendrik Doeff lived in Nagasaki, Japan in the early nineteenth century and was intrigued by the haiku form. He wrote several haiku examples in Japanese, trying to adopt the same spirit and tone of the original Japanese poems, as well as stick to the number of on. The above is a translation into English of one of his poems. He creates a nice juxtaposition between the “fast as thunderbolt” arms and their ability to comfort and become a pillow.*

**Example #4**

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(“In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound)

*Ezra Pound wrote this haiku example, “In a Station of the Metro,” in 1913. Many consider it to be one of the first successful English-language haiku examples ever written. Pound had originally written this poem in thirty lines, but pared it down to the two lines above. Pound was an Imagist poet, and his economy of language and focus on these very distinct images make him a natural inheritor of the Japanese haiku tradition. He describes a brief moment on the Paris metro with the beautiful juxtaposition between faces on petals. The use of the image of petals and the wet, black bough connote spring in a delicate way.*

**Example #5**

Snow in my shoe  
Abandoned  
Sparrow’s nest

(By Jack Kerouac)

*Like many other Beat poets, Jack Kerouac was impressed and inspired by R. H. Blyth’s English translations of Japanese haikus. He does an excellent job of providing evocative imagery that raises questions and forces the reader to work a bit harder to understand his meaning.*

**Example #6**

A stone at its core,  
this snowball’s the porcelain  
knob on winter’s door.

(By Paul Muldoon)

*Contemporary Irish poet Paul Muldoon wrote many dozens of examples of haiku. He chose to stick to the strict 5-7-5 syllable count in English, and employed seasonal imagery. Muldoon also provides an interesting juxtaposition between the snowball and a doorknob.*