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Professor

Class

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#12: Basho and Keats in Nature

The differences between the *haiku* poetry of Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) and the European poetry of John Keats (1795-1821) should not be understated. Each writer comes from a distinct background and culture that shapes their way of viewing the world. As a result, the tone, rhetoric, and length used in expression creates a certain feel worthy of comparison. As each writer provides their description of nature through poetic expression, the inner constructs of “Moonlight Slants” by Basho and “To Autumn” by Keats inform the reader with meaningful insight into cultural differences.

Each poet lived a life worthy of brief description before delving into the nuances of their work. In the case of Basho, he achieved fame in his lifetime as the best of his generation in 17th century Japan. His father was a samurai, and he initially just worked in the kitchen. He worked for Todo Yoshitada as a child. This allowed him to gain inspiration to pursue *haiku* through *haikai no renga*, which is a form of collaborative poetry. Yoshitada’s sudden death caused him to leave home and abandon all hope of following his father’s samurai footsteps. His composition of *an ancient pond / a frog jumps in / the splash of water* (1686) made him instantly famous for his simple style that respected nature. As for Keats, he was brought up in London in a world that did not accept his work as particularly remarkable until after he died. Keats always had problems with money, and knowledge of his large bequests were withheld from him by William Walton, his benefactor. Expected to undertake a medical career, he died all too young of tuberculosis.

Basho's *haiku* is highly descriptive of nature. It does not overtly seek to communicate a message or theme. Rather, it communicates the passage of time in its natural course over the seasons. With it come occasional reflection how others might perceive the same forward motion: *it is deep autumn / my neighbor / how does he live, I wonder*. This kind of simple reflection is a hallmark of Basho's work. At another point, Basho seems to allude to what may have been his choices to leave his family behind and all opportunity as a samurai: *ah, summer grasses! All that remains Of the warriors dreams*. If this is introspection, Basho shows no signs of torment or distress for past decisions made. Just as *a frog jumps in / the splash of water*, so does Basho jump into developing fresh and natural descriptions of the world around him.

Where Basho succeeds in simplicity, Keats soars in descriptive delight. He displays a true talent for painting pictures with his words: "With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run; To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees, And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core." The words are thick with detail as the words seemingly jump off the page. Keats takes advantage of the English language to show off his ability to rhyme words like "eves" and "trees." Finally, Keats focuses on a much more limited passage of time. He uses well over double the words to describe a single season. Thus, his description of Autumn goes into complex detail.

Basho differs from Keats in his courage to leave matters undefined. He seems to trust that his readers will have the imagination to see how the frog jumps in the water without having to describe the surroundings in high detail. Meanwhile, Keats avoids inserting anything that may resemble his personal life into his poetry. His work may have been welcome detour away from uncomfortable situations related to his obliged medical pursuits. For Basho, poetry was life and poetry was life. His description of the world around him is a pursuit that seems to encompass his entire being. As such, Basho and Keats see the world in distinctly different ways.