

Form Poetry

By Esther Aardsma

The type of poetry that comes to mind when you hear the word “poetry” is probably *form* poetry. Each “form” is required to adhere to a certain prescription, like a given number of lines or syllables, a specific meter (kind of like the drum beat of the words), or a certain rhyme scheme (fancy word for pattern).

There are hundreds of poetic forms throughout the world, with variations of existing forms arguably able to be claimed as new forms. Some forms are very old, like the *ghazal* and the *tanka*.

Originating from the Middle East, the *ghazal* is a poem that deals with loss, romance, sexuality, and/or spirituality—probably tracing back to Arabic poetry in the 7th century AD. Each *ghazal* consists of five to fifteen couplets (a couplet is a pair of lines) that are each complete sentences or thoughts but are linked thematically or tonally to each other. The couplets’ second lines all rhyme with each other or use the same word at the end, so the rhyming scheme could be denoted as AA BA CA, and so on. Each line in the *ghazal* has the same metrical/syllabic count. The second-to-last line contains the name of the person the poem is written from the perspective of, as a sort of sign-off.

The *tanka* (meaning “short poem”), also sometimes known as *waka* (general Japanese word for “poem”), is considered a fundamental part of Japanese literature and the parent of the *haiku*. Also originating in the 7th century, the *tanka* became a favorite in the Japanese Imperial Court as well as between correspondents and lovers. According to Edward Hirsch’s *A Poet’s Glossary*, “the earliest anthology of Japanese poetry, *Man’yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, ca. 759) contains more than forty-two hundred poems in the *tanka* form. The form gradually...became so popular it marginalized all other forms.”¹ A number of rituals arose around the writing of *tanka/waka*. *Waka* parties called *utakai* might be held on a special occasion, like a birthday or housewarming, and all the participants would write a *waka* and present them. *Waka* parties of a more competitive (and over time more sober and formalized) nature were called *utaawase*: Two teams would compete and be awarded points based on the best *tanka* written. To this day, the *tanka* remains a staple of Japanese culture and

literature. The tanka, like other Japanese poems, is difficult to fully translate into English form and characters—but the rough gist is that the form consists of five lines with a syllable pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 (although Japanese syllables do not equal English syllables). The lines do not have to rhyme. In general, the first three lines are grouped together into one thought, then the poem pivots, changing tone or perspective, and the last two lines are grouped together into another thought. One Japanese tanka translates as:

From this year on
I'll deeply feel the spring
With these cherry blossoms.
That they will soon be gone—
Oh, that I did not know it!

Ki no Tsurayuki (ca. 872–945 AD)²

The ghazal and the tanka are just the very, very beginning of the world of form poetry. If you're interested in exploring more forms, you can check out some books on poetry forms from your local library, or research online on websites such as poetryfoundation.org or writersdigest.com. There's a whole world of *sestinas*, *villanelles*, *rondels*, *ottava rimas*, and more...just waiting for you to explore!

¹ Academy of American Poets, "Edward Hirsch's *A Poet's Glossary*," text, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://poets.org/edward-hirschs-poets-glossary>.

² *KKS I: 49 | Waka Poetry*, October 31, 2015, <https://www.wakapoetry.net/kks-i-49/>.