

# Creating poetry with Active Listening

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## Introduction

No one can dispute the fact that active listening is important, especially to those who are in a disadvantaged position such as children and the elderly. But is there a possibility that active listening plays an important role in the field of poetry?

This research examines the poems created utilizing active listening. Some poems that are examined here are quoted from the poetry column, “Morning Poem” in the Sankei Newspaper and the Literary Column in the Kobe Newspaper. Other poems have won awards in various poetry contests. The poets are Chiyo Tanaka, Masano Nakashima, and Sayaka Nakajima. They range from six to 102 years old. In addition, some poems by Tomoko Nakashima are examined because active listening is the background of her poems. This is a practical report.

## 2. Chiyo Tanaka and her poem

Chiyo Tanaka was born in Osaka in 1905. She had a lonely childhood with her father as her mother left them when she was small. She was an only child. Her father delivered newspapers for a living. He left home about 2:30 every morning and came home in the evening. He suffered from gout in his hip and moreover, he was undernourished. He worked and worked, and only lived to the age of 60.

They were so destitute that her father was always poorly dressed. It was hard for her to accept him as a father because he was very shabby. She recalled that she once said to her father, who was wearing his kimono tucked up, “I am ashamed of you. I don’t want others to see us together and for them

to know that I am your daughter.” After he passed away, she felt very sorry for him and regretted what she had said and done. Even after she turned a hundred years old, she kept apologizing to him, the man who had loved her and raised her.

In 2006, she began to come to the “Tokimeki” Day Service Center in Kakogawa. She liked to talk about various things with the people around her. Above all, she often talked about her hard childhood and her love for her father. Hiroko Nakajima was working there as a psychiatric social worker and she became interested in Chiyo’s rhythmic way of talking. She listened to her attentively and wrote down what she said about her father. Her words became a poem.

She was very impressed with the poem and sent it to the poetry column, “Morning Poem” in the Sankei Newspaper. Every day one poem is chosen and appears in the column. Her poem was selected and appeared on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007. It moved a lot of people, and a comment about her poem was published in the reader’s column of the paper. What’s more, it was chosen as the best poem of May with the comment by the selector, Shinkawa Kazue, a poet, “I was deeply impressed and moved by the fact that you have been apologizing to your father even after you are over hundred years old. Chiyo, you have fully discharged your filial duties because you have been thinking about him for many years.”

Here is her award-winning poem.

Daddy

Daddy, who passed away young  
Why didn’t I give him kind words?  
Why wasn’t I nice to him?  
A parent and a daughter  
Lonely childhood  
Daddy, who protected me  
I put my palms together  
And pray for him

Daddy, I am doing well

### **3. Masano Nakashima and her poems**

Masano Nakashima was born in Shosha Tai, which is now in Himeji City, in 1915.

Before she married, she was a nurse. After she got married, she was a housewife for many years.

Because of the Farmland Reform Act of 1947, her family lost almost all of their property and she began to work at a post office. She retired at the age of 60, and began to enjoy growing rice, vegetables and flowers.

After her husband passed away in 1984, she lived alone. Her daughter sometimes visited her and began to pay attention to what she said and wrote. She became aware of the fact that Masano's words were very impressive and wondered if they might be a subject for good poetry. She began to send them to the poetry corner of the Kobe Newspaper.

At the age of 77, Masano became a poet. Her poetry began to be highly appreciated and they were in the Kobe Newspaper quite often. Her poem "I'll brace myself" was chosen as the best poem of the year, and she was awarded with the 2002 best prize in the field of poetry. In addition, her poem "A 78 Year Old and a 17 Year Old" was chosen for the 1994 best prize in the Harima Literature Festival. "Because They Are Our Mice" was accepted in the 1999 Kobe Citizens' Literature Contest, and "Offering" was chosen for the 2002 Hyogo Poetry festival.

In September of 2002, when she was 87, she was diagnosed with lung cancer and the doctor announced that she may live for only one more year. Her decision was to stay home without special treatment. She stayed home and lived her life as positively as she had done for many years. She continued riding her tricycle and attending to her garden.

On January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003, which was her 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, she published her

poetry book “Fushigi.” In the spring of that year, she gradually began to lose her strength and coughed a lot, however, she accepted her reality with humor. Her poems continued to appear in the Kobe Newspaper. She passed away on November 2nd, 2003.

These are some of her poems.

A 77-year old and a 16-year old

On our way to visit a grave  
We passed a river and saw some crucian carp swimming  
Wishing them to be in the pond in my garden  
Hiroko and I bought a net at Jusco  
And with a bucket in hand  
And with rain boots on  
We went to catch them  
But they were too smart for us  
We couldn't catch any no matter how hard we tried.

This is Masano's first poem and was chosen for 1994 best prize in the Harima Literature Festival.

A 78 Year Old and a 17 Year Old

Having taken off my casual sandals  
Wearing Hiroko's school shoes she's outgrown  
Hanging on to Hiroko  
I went to see Plum Blossoms

They are our mice

Yesterday I closed the doors rightly  
For fear of having our Japanese rice eaten  
This morning I found some of it gone  
“What lucky mice they are to feast on Japanese rice!”  
Said my daughter

But it's all right  
Because they are our mice

<Cultural note>

In the year this poem was written, Japan suffered from a rice shortage because of bad weather, and so rice was imported from Southeast Asia.

An 83 Year Old in the Vegetable Garden

I can't carry a bucket of water easily  
Step by step I can move a bucket  
And let the full bucket walk  
Led by a bucket of water  
I follow along behind

Offering

I happened to find tea, water, and rice  
In the hall in the evening  
which I thought I had offered to our family Buddhist altar early this morning  
Probably somebody came in  
When I was carrying them Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

This poem was chosen for the 2002 Hyogo Poetry festival.

I'll brace myself

Though I tried to take my onions over there  
And to bring my potatoes here  
I couldn't  
As my head does not work  
Neither do my feet  
Oh well  
I'll brace myself with a cup of rice

This was chosen as the winner of the 2002 best prize in the field of poetry in

the Kobe Newspaper.

Cough

My stomach and intestines  
Surge and turn all over, topsy-turvy  
Make a somersault  
It's a good exercise  
It's very tough all the more  
It's really, really, tough

#### **4. Sayaka Nakajima and her poems**

Sayaka Nakajima was born on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006. She is rather shy and loves reading books. Her family members began to notice that her words were very childlike and impressive. They remember she said, "Mr. Typhoon is now wearing his shoes and tying his shoelaces to get going, placing a huge bag full of wind next to him. " when she heard her family members were saying that a big typhoon was coming to hit Japan. In the evening she said to her legs, "My dear legs, let's take a bath and my dear legs, good night, see you tomorrow morning."

The night before she visited her grandmother, she expressed her joy saying, "I can't wait! I will wake up earlier than the Sun and go to see Grandma." Once she said, "Although I want her back, I will lend my mother to my baby brother" and then after he was in and out of the hospital because of asthma, she said, "I want to borrow my mother from my baby brother."

Her mother, Hiroko, who was deeply impressed by Chiyo Tanaka's words and helped her win the best prize of May 2007, sent Sayaka's poems to the Sankei Newspaper and the Kobe Newspaper. Three of her poems were chosen and appeared in the Sankei Newspaper in 2013. In addition, one of her poems was in the Kobe Newspaper on October 21st of the same year.

These are Sayaka's poems.

A trap was made (March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

My front tooth came out  
A trap was made in my mouth  
Neighboring teeth are surprised  
And looking into it

Souta, Bines (2013)

Souta, my baby brother, is like a morning glory  
He always clings to his mother  
And he walks along with chairs and tables

Green Pepper's Water Gun (Oct 4<sup>th</sup>) Sankei Newspaper

When I cut off the calyx of a green pepper  
It squirted water like a water gun  
Having been in the great HEAT  
It must have stored much water

Bellflower (October 21<sup>st</sup>) Kobe Newspaper

I took a bath with my mother  
The first time after she gave birth to my little brother  
She washed her hair  
She bent down and all her hair came forward  
It was like a bell flower

##### **5. The poems that Tomoko Nakashima has created, utilizing active listening**

Tomoko Nakashima was born in 1951, in Himeji. She is the daughter of Masano Nakashima. She has written poems utilizing active listening. She listened to her mother, Masano, and her granddaughter attentively and wrote poems.

These are Tomoko's poems about Masano.

For Ever

What a big paunch!  
"There are Kobang in it"

For ever  
For ever  
I want to hear Mother's humorous words  
She is going to turn 83 soon

<cultural note >

Kobang is smaller-sized oval Japanese gold coin which was used from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century( to the end of Edo period)

Masanosan

"My legs don't work I can't walk  
I only wear a cap as if I were working hard  
I can't do anything  
I am too tired  
I just live to breathe  
Where will they hold my funeral?  
It will be in a ceremonial hall after all  
It will be too much to have many people come to this house"

After she came back from her vegetable garden  
She sighed for while and said  
"Oh, well, well, I'll eat Zennzai"

<Cultural note>

"Zennzai" is a thick bean-meal soup with sugar and rice cake.

Relief



When I said to my mother,  
“You coughed a lot during the night, didn’t you?”  
She replied, “No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember.”

When I said at the end of the day,  
“You had a hard day.”  
She said, “I am in the worst condition of my life.  
From here things will only get better.”

I was encouraged and relieved by her words

Elder Sister

Sayaka said  
“I want my mother back though I lend her to my baby brother”  
After her baby brother was in and out of the hospital  
she said, “I want to borrow my mother from my baby brother”

Love Poem

I can’t wait  
Tomorrow I’ll wake up earlier than the sun  
And visit Grandma  
Said my granddaughter

I can’t wait  
Tomorrow I will wake up before sunrise  
And I will be waiting for you

## **6. Active listening and poems**

From these poems, it can be said that without someone that listened to them attentively, none of these poems would have been appreciated by anyone. Without Hiroko Nakajima’s help, Chiyo Tanaka’s words would have never become a poem. Without Tomoko Nakashima, Masano’s words would have never become poems. Without Hiroko Nakajima, Sayaka’s words would have

never become poems. If they hadn't listened to those three attentively, their words would never have become poems to move a lot of people.

As for Tomoko's poems, it is interesting that her poems are made utilizing active listening. Taking "Masanosan" for example, most of the lines are made of what Masano actually said. She listens and observes attentively and then makes poems. The background of her poems is active listening.

## **7. Conclusion**

Generally speaking, poetry is often regarded as something special and difficult to understand. Therefore, making poems is sometimes considered to be far more difficult than writing prose. Originally poetry was an outburst of emotion and excitement that everyone had in his or her life. However, poetry exists in the details of ordinary life. If we listen to others attentively, there is something that appeals to us. If we are sensitive and their words are written down, there is a possibility that these could become a poem. At the very least it will be the beginning of making poetry. From the practice which we have gone through, it can be concluded that active listening is essential for helping to create these poems.