

Narrative poetry: Telling stories through verse

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Narrative poetry tells stories through verse. Like a novel or a short story, a narrative poem has plot, characters and setting. It creates a mood using poetic devices such as rhyme and meter and often includes action and dialogue.

In most cases, narrative poems have only one speaker — the narrator — who tells the entire story from beginning to end. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" is narrated by a grieving man. In the poem, he describes his mysterious confrontation with a raven and his descent into despair.

Origins Of Narrative Poetry

The earliest poetry was not written but spoken, recited, chanted or sung. Poetic devices like rhythm, rhyme and repetition made stories easier to memorize. This allowed people to hand the poems down through generations. Narrative poetry evolved from this oral tradition.

In nearly every part of the world, narrative poetry established a foundation for other literary forms. For example, "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," which have come down to us from ancient

Greece, have inspired artists and writers for more than 2,000 years.

Narrative poetry became a literary tradition throughout the Western world. The German saga known as "Nibelungenlied," for example, lives on in composer Richard Wagner's opera series, "The Ring of the Nibelung." The Anglo Saxon narrative "Beowulf" has inspired modern-day books, movies, operas and computer games.

In the East, India produced two monumental narratives in Sanskrit. The "Mahabharata" is the world's longest poem with more than 100,000 couplets. The "Ramayana" spread Indian culture and ideas across Asia, influencing literature, performance and architecture.

Identifying Narrative Poetry

Narrative is one of three major categories of poetry. The other two are dramatic and lyric. Each type of poetry has distinct characteristics and functions. While lyric poems emphasize self-expression, narrative poems emphasize plot. Dramatic poetry, such as William Shakespeare's plays, is an extended stage production, usually with many different speakers.

However, the distinction between genres may blur. Poets weave lyrical language into narrative poems. Similarly, a narrative poem might resemble dramatic poetry when the poet includes more than one narrator.

Therefore, the defining feature of narrative poetry is the narrative arc. The narrator moves through a chronology of events from challenge and conflict to a final resolution.

Types Of Narrative Poems

Most ancient and medieval narrative poems were epics. Written in a grandiose style, they retold legends of heroes and gods. Other traditional forms include romances about knights and ballads about love, heartbreak and dramatic events.

However, narrative poetry is constantly changing and there are countless other ways to tell stories through verse. The following examples illustrate several different examples of narrative poetry.

"The Song Of Hiawatha"

The first example are lines are from "The Song of Hiawatha." It was written by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

*On the Mountains of the Prairie, On the great Red Pipestone Quarry,
Gitche Manito, the mighty, He the Master of Life, descending, On the red crags of the quarry
Stood erect, and called the nations, Called the tribes of men together.*

"The Song of Hiawatha" narrates Native American legends and mimics the Finnish national epic, "The Kalevala." In turn, "The Kalevala" echoes early narratives such as "The Iliad," "Beowulf" and the "Nibelungenlied."

"Idylls Of The King"

The second example comes from "Idylls of the King" by British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

I fain would follow love, if that could be; I needs must follow death, who calls for me; Call and I follow, I follow! let me die.

An idyll is a narrative form of poetry that began in ancient Greece. Tennyson's idyll is a romance based on British legends. In a series of 12 blank verse poems, Tennyson tells the story of King Arthur, his knights and his tragic love for his queen.

By writing about chivalry and courtly love, Tennyson wrote about behaviors and attitudes he saw in his own society. "Idylls of the King" has become a kind of social commentary.

"The Ballad Of The Harp-Weaver"

The third example comes from "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" by American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay.

"Son," said my mother, When I was knee-high, "You've need of clothes to cover you, And not a rag have I.

"There's nothing in the house To make a boy breeches, Nor shears to cut a cloth with Nor thread to take stitches."

"The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" tells the story of a mother's unconditional love for her child. By the end of the poem, she dies and her son calmly accepts her sacrifice.

Millay cast the story as a ballad, a form that evolved from traditional folk music.

"The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" is both sentimental and disturbing. It can be understood as a simple story about poverty or a complex statement on the sacrifices women make.

"Autobiography Of Red"

The last example comes from the poem "Autobiography of Red." It is by Canadian poet and translator Anne Carson.

...Small, red, and upright he waited, gripping his new bookbag tight in one hand and touching a lucky penny inside his coat pocket with the other, while the first snows of winter floated down on his eyelashes and covered the branches around him and silenced all trace of the world.

"Autobiography of Red" is based on an ancient Greek myth about a hero's battle with a red-winged monster. Carson recreated the monster as a boy who battles modern-day problems involving love and sexual identity.

Carson's book-length work belongs to the category known as the verse novel. It shifts between description and dialogue and from poetry to prose. Prose is language in its regular form, without rhythm or rhyme.

Novels in verse do not follow established forms. Russian author Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) used a complex rhyme scheme and an unconventional meter for his verse novel, "Eugene Onegin."

English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) composed "Aurora Leigh" in blank verse.

Vivid language and simple stories have made book-length narrative poetry a popular trend in young adult publishing. Jacqueline Woodson won the National Book Award for "Brown Girl Dreaming." The book describes her childhood as an African American growing up in the American South. Other best-selling verse novels include "The Crossover" by Kwame Alexander and the "Crank" trilogy by Ellen Hopkins.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following MOST influenced narrative poetry?
 - (A) dramatic poetry
 - (B) lyric poetry
 - (C) oral tradition
 - (D) verse novel

- 2 How have vivid language and simple stories affected modern narrative poetry?
 - (A) Narrative poetry has become more focused on ancient Greek myths.
 - (B) Narrative poetry has become more popular among young adults.
 - (C) Narrative poetry has become easier to pass down through generations.
 - (D) Narrative poetry has become shorter in length and easier to read.

- 3 What is the main reason the author includes the section "Origins Of Narrative Poetry"?
 - (A) to compare narrative poetry to the other literary forms it inspires
 - (B) to describe the dominance of narrative poetry in Anglo Saxon culture that continues to this day
 - (C) to explain how narrative poetry developed from an oral tradition and became a literary tradition
 - (D) to show how ancient Greek myths strongly influenced narrative poetry

- 4 What is one reason why the author includes information about how to identify narrative poetry in the article?
 - (A) to distinguish narrative poetry from other types of poetry
 - (B) to emphasize the importance of narrative poetry in the East
 - (C) to provide example passages of narrative poetry
 - (D) to show examples of the lyrical aspects of narrative poetry