

# Understanding Narrative Poetry

## What is Narrative Poetry?

Narrative Poetry is poetry that tells a series of events using poetic devices such as rhythm, rhyme, compact language, and attention to sound. In other words, a narrative poem tells a story, but it does it with poetic style. Many of the same elements that are found in a short story are also found in a narrative poem. The following are some elements of narrative poetry that are important:

- character
- setting
- conflict
- plot

## What are the origins of Narrative Poetry?

Narratives are the oldest form of poetry, and narrative poetry grew out of oral traditions. Long before there was paper to write on or ink to write with, long before the invention of the printing press, people often shared stories as a form of entertainment. Poets used elements such as repetition and rhyme to allow for poems to be more easily memorized, recited, and passed on. Think about how much easier it is to remember the words to a song than it is to recall all of the words of a short story. The ancient Greek poet Homer wrote the epic poems *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* as part of spoken tradition: both can be considered narrative poems. Homer's work was passed down through the generations verbally, until it was later captured by written language.

Even when written language emerged, narrative poetry continued to be the dominant form of verse. It was favored by medieval poets, most notably exemplified by Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of twenty-four narrative poems. Narrative poetry reigned in popularity all the way through the Renaissance. Its dominance began to wane only in the eighteenth century, when Romantic poets inspired a shift to lyric poetry.

Still, narrative poetry was far from abandoned. These stories were also often used to relate historical events. In the same way that we spread news through newspapers today, oral stories were used to spread news of historical events long ago. One of the most famous narrative poems was written well after the height of its popularity as a form: Paul Revere's Ride, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, is an enduring classic of the genre. Narrated by the innkeeper character, it tells the story of Paul Revere riding through Boston warning of the British invasion by sea. Today, narrative poetry is less dominant as a form of poetry than it used to be, but it is still common in song lyrics and in children's books. Think of *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss, which uses rhythm, rhyming, and repetition to tell a complete story from beginning to end.

## In what ways are narrative poems similar to short stories?

Narrative poems vary in style, and have changed over the ages as both language and literary trends have evolved. Some were composed with the intention of being sung and danced to, while others are written to record human history. Narrative poems have many similarities to short stories. For example, short stories have characters, a setting, a conflict, and a clear beginning, middle and end. Narrative poems have all of these elements as well. Sometimes there may only be one character, or there may be many characters. At times, the setting may be implied rather than obvious, and the conflict may be an internal conflict rather than external.

Consider *The Raven*, Edgar Allen Poe. This is one of Poe's most famous poems. It is a narrative poem that begins with a man hearing a knock on his door at night. Over the course of eighteen stanzas, the narrator, who we learn is mourning the loss of his lover Lenore, descends into madness. Poe's poem has a defined narrative arc. The narrator hears something knocking at his door at night, and realizes it is a raven, who comes in and then refuses to leave. The narrator's lover has passed away, and the raven, in refusing to leave, represents a heavy grief that the narrator of the poem feels will never leave him. The

repetition in the poem—"rapping," "napping," "tapping"—along with the iambic meter, contributes to the poem's high level of musicality. Every stanza ends with the word "more": whether it be "evermore," "nothing more," or "nevermore." Poe also incorporates the rhyme with the name of the speaker's lost love, Lenore, further reinforcing the rhyme.

## **Narrative Poems Include Story Elements**

A narrative poem includes the necessary elements of storytelling. A short story must include developed characters, and a plot with action, conflict and resolution; so too must a narrative poem.

Typically, with the exception of epic poetry, a narrative poem compacts the structure of the story into a shorter form than prose. Narrative poetry also includes a setting and dialogue between characters. While most narrative poems are told in chronological order, the narrator can incorporate flashbacks, dreams and musings of the future as well.

### **How can we analyze narrative poems?**

In order to analyze a narrative poem, first read through it with the following questions in mind:

(Characterization) Who are the characters in the poem?

(Plot) What are the characters doing, or what is happening?

(Cause and Effect) Why are these events happening?

(Conflict) How are the characters affected by the action or events?

(Theme) What can be learned from the poem?

## **Narrative Poems Use Poetic Techniques**

A narrative poem uses figurative language and poetic techniques. While the narrative poem does tell a story, it must do so with poetic flair. Many narrative poems follow a rhyming pattern, though some use the free-verse style. Imagery -- including metaphors, similes and hyperbole -- is also an important element of narrative poems. Some poets choose to write in blank verse, while others utilize a variety of metrical patterns. Metrical rhythms include iambic pentameter as found in Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol." Another example of metrical rhythm includes dactylic hexameter as found in Homer's "The Odyssey."

## **Narrative Poems Entertain**

A narrative poem entertains the reader. This is achieved, in part, when all the elements work together to create a story that is charming and intriguing, rather than exploring a poet's innermost thoughts and feelings. In ancient cultures, storytellers entertained audiences poetically with fascinating and fanciful stories. Modern narrative poets do the same with a pen and paper. Using humor and tragedy and mixing reality with fantasy, narrative poems captivate their audiences and leave them with a story to remember.

## **Where can we find narrative poetry in our daily lives?**

Although narrative poetry is one of the oldest forms of literature, this does not mean it is no longer prevalent in today's world. In fact, any time you turn on a radio, you can hear narrative poetry on nearly any radio station. The best place to see or hear narrative poetry today would be in songs. Songs are simply poems set to music, and the songs that tell stories are narrative poems set to music.

Title of the poem: \_\_\_\_\_

**Setting** (Where? When? What is the overall mood? Does it shift?)\***There may be more than one.**\*\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Characters** (Who? What do you know about them?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Conflict** (What types do you see? How does it lead to tension or suspense?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Plot** (Is there a sequences of events? What seems to be the climax? Is it resolved?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Imagery** (What sensory details does the author use? What images stand out the most?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Figurative Language?** (simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Poetic devices?** (rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, repetition ,structure of stanzas)

\_\_\_\_\_

After reading "Gentle Alice Brown", answer the questions from "**How can we analyze narrative poems?**".

## GENTLE ALICE BROWN

*by: W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911)*

**I**T was a robber's daughter, and her name was Alice Brown.  
Her father was the terror of a small Italian town;  
Her mother was a foolish, weak, but amiable old thing;  
But it isn't of her parents that I'm going for to sing.

As Alice was a-sitting at her window-sill one day,  
A beautiful young gentleman he chanced to pass that way;  
She cast her eyes upon him, and he looked so good and true,  
That she thought, "I could be happy with a gentleman like you!"

And every morning passed her house that cream of gentlemen,  
She knew she might expect him at a quarter unto ten,  
A sorter in the Custom-house, it was his daily road  
(The Custom-house was fifteen minutes' walk from her abode.)

But Alice was a pious girl, who knew it wasn't wise  
To look at strange young sorters with expressive purple eyes;  
So she sought the village priest to whom her family confessed,  
The priest by whom their little sins were carefully assessed.

"Oh, holy father," Alice said, "'t would grieve you, would it not?  
To discover that I was a most disreputable lot!  
Of all unhappy sinners I'm the most unhappy one!"  
The padre said, "Whatever have you been and gone and done?"

"I have helped mamma to steal a little kiddy from its dad,  
I've assisted dear papa in cutting up a little lad.  
I've planned a little burglary and forged a little check,  
And slain a little baby for the coral on its neck!"

The worthy pastor heaved a sigh, and dropped a silent tear--  
And said, "You mustn't judge yourself too heavily, my dear--  
It's wrong to murder babies, little corals for to fleece;  
But sins like these one expiates at half-a-crown apiece.

"Girls will be girls--you're very young, and flighty in your mind;  
Old heads upon young shoulders we must not expect to find:  
We mustn't be too hard upon these little girlish tricks--  
Let's see--five crimes at half-a-crown--exactly twelve-and-six."

"Oh, father," little Alice cried, "your kindness makes me weep,  
You do these little things for me so singularly cheap--  
Your thoughtful liberality I never can forget;  
But O there is another crime I haven't mentioned yet!

"A pleasant-looking gentleman, with pretty purple eyes,  
I've noticed at my window, as I've sat a-catching flies;  
He passes by it every day as certain as can be--  
I blush to say I've winked at him and he has winked at me!"

"For shame," said Father Paul, "my erring daughter! On my word  
This is the most distressing news that I have ever heard.  
Why, naughty girl, your excellent papa has pledged your hand  
To a promising young robber, the lieutenant of his band!"

"This dreadful piece of news will pain your worthy parents so!  
They are the most remunerative customers I know;  
For many many years they've kept starvation from my doors,  
I never knew so criminal a family as yours!"

"The common country folk in this insipid neighborhood  
Have nothing to confess, they're so ridiculously good;  
And if you marry any one respectable at all,  
Why, you'll reform, and what will then become of Father Paul?"

The worthy priest, he up and drew his cowl upon his crown,  
And started off in haste to tell the news to Robber Brown;  
To tell him how his daughter, who now was for marriage fit,  
Had winked upon a sorter, who reciprocated it.

Good Robber Brown, he muffled up his anger pretty well,  
He said, "I have a notion, and that notion I will tell;  
I will nab this gay young sorter, terrify him into fits,  
And get my gentle wife to chop him into little bits.

"I've studied human nature, and I know a thing or two,  
Though a girl may fondly love a living gent, as many do--  
A feeling of disgust upon her senses there will fall  
When she looks upon his body chopped particularly small."

He traced that gallant sorter to a still suburban square;  
He watched his opportunity and seized him unaware;  
He took a life-preserver and he hit him on the head,  
And Mrs. Brown dissected him before she went to bed.

And pretty little Alice grew more settled in her mind,  
She nevermore was guilty of a weakness of the kind,  
Until at length good Robber Brown bestowed her hand  
On the promising young robber, the lieutenant of his band.