

# Narrative poetry: Telling stories through verse

By ThoughtCo.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.12.20

Word Count 1,149



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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. Using a range of poetic techniques such as rhyme and meter, narrative poetry presents a series of events, often including action and dialogue.

In most cases, narrative poems have only one speaker — the narrator — who relates the entire story from beginning to end. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" is narrated by a grieving man. Over the course of 18 stanzas, the narrator 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 such as rhythm, rhyme and repetition made stories easier to memorize so they could be carried long distances and handed 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, among the highest achievements of ancient Greece are the narrative poems. "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" have inspired artists and writers for more than 2,000 years.

Narrative poetry became an enduring literary tradition throughout the Western world. "Nibelungenlied," a German saga, lives on in composer Richard Wagner's opera series, "The Ring of the Nibelung" ("Der Ring des Nibelungen"). 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 isn't always exact. Sometimes poets combine 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. From the epic tales of ancient Greece to 21st century verse novels, the narrator moves through a chronology of events from challenge and conflict to a final resolution.

### **Types Of Narrative Poems**

Ancient and medieval narrative poems were most commonly epics. Written in a grandiose style, they retold legends of virtuous heroes and powerful gods. Other traditional forms include Arthurian romances about knights and chivalry and ballads about love, heartbreak and dramatic events.

However, narrative poetry is an ever-evolving art, and there are countless other ways to tell stories through verse. The following examples illustrate several different approaches to narrative poetry.

#### **"The Song Of Hiawatha"**

The first example are lines are from "The Song of Hiawatha" 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 in verse that 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 originated in ancient Greece. Tennyson's idyll is an Arthurian 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, Guinevere.

By writing about chivalry and courtly love, Tennyson wrote about behaviors and attitudes he saw in his own Victorian society. "Idylls of the King" elevates narrative poetry from storytelling to 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. By the end of the poem, she dies, on her harp while weaving her child's magical clothes.

Millay cast the story as a ballad, a form that evolved from traditional folk music. The iambic meter and a predictable rhyme scheme of the poem create a sing-song rhythm that suggests childlike innocence.

Famously recited by country musician Johnny Cash, "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.

Story song ballads became an important part of the American folk song tradition of the 1960s. Popular examples include Bob Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man" and Pete Seeger's "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy."

## "Autobiography Of Red"

The last example comes from the poem "Autobiography of Red" 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. Writing in free verse, Carson recreated the monster as a moody boy who battles modern-day problems related to 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 How does the author communicate that modern narrative poetry is similar to traditional or ancient narrative literature?
- (A) by comparing the Western literary tradition with that of India and Asia
  - (B) by identifying the ancient Greek poems that developed from oral traditions
  - (C) by citing the inspiration for each example of narrative poetry
  - (D) by listing the characteristics and functions of modern and ancient narrative poetry

- 2 How is a dramatic poem different from a narrative poem?
- (A) Though both tell a story, a dramatic poem creates a stage production.
  - (B) Though both emphasize self-expression, a dramatic poem focuses on a story.
  - (C) Though both include lyrical language, a dramatic poem uses rhyme and rhythm.
  - (D) Though both create a stage production, a dramatic poem tells a story with a narrative arc.

- 3 Read the following paragraph from the section "Origins Of Narrative Poetry."

*The earliest poetry was not written but spoken, recited, chanted or sung. Poetic devices such as rhythm, rhyme and repetition made stories easier to memorize so they could be carried long distances and handed down through generations. Narrative poetry evolved from this oral tradition.*

What is the main reason why the author includes this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to compare traditional oral poetry to modern music
  - (B) to distinguish between written poetry and oral literary forms
  - (C) to explain how early poets were able to share and remember poetry
  - (D) to show that narrative poetry originated from an ancient desire for stories
- 4 Read the two sentences from the section "Idylls Of The King."

*By writing about chivalry and courtly love, Tennyson wrote about behaviors and attitudes he saw in his own Victorian society.*

*"Idylls of the King" elevates narrative poetry from storytelling to social commentary.*

How do these sentences develop the idea that narrative poetry continues to evolve?

- (A) by describing the traditional literature that inspired Tennyson's work
- (B) by explaining how Tennyson translated traditional stories into modern themes
- (C) by providing an example of a poem that departed from all traditional norms
- (D) by showing that behaviors and attitudes of the past have no place in the modern world