

Understanding Narrative Poetry

What is Narrative Poetry?

Narrative Poems are poems that tell stories. There is a beginning, which introduces the background to the story, a middle, which tells the action of the event, and an end, which concludes and summarizes the story.

What are the origins of Narrative Poetry?

Narratives are the oldest form of poetry. 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. 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. In order to help recall details of the events, people began to use rhyme and rhythm to give their stories a musical quality that would allow the story to be remembered and recalled much more easily. 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. That is exactly how narrative poems were originally created.

In what ways are narrative poems similar to short stories?

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.

How can we analyze narrative poems?

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

- Who are the characters in the poem?
- What are the characters doing, or what is happening?
- Why are these events happening?
- How are the characters affected by the action or events?
- What can be learned from the poem?

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.

Read to Understand

The poem “The Echoing Green” was written by the 18th century American poet, William Blake. As you read “The Echoing Green” as an example of a narrative, think about who the characters are. What does the setting of this poem look like? Why might William Blake consider this a story worth writing a poem about?

The Echoing Green by William Blake

The sun does arise,	1
And make happy the skies;	
The merry bells ring	
To welcome the Spring;	
The skylark and thrush,	5
The birds of the bush,	
Sing louder around	
To the bells' cheerful sound;	
While our sports shall be seen	
On the echoing green.	10
Old John, with white hair,	
Does laugh away care,	
Sitting under the oak,	
Among the old folk.	
They laugh at our play,	15
And soon they all say,	
'Such, such were the joys	
When we all--girls and boys -	
In our youth-time were seen	
On the echoing green.'	20
Till the little ones, weary,	
No more can be merry:	
The sun does descend,	
And our sports have an end.	
Round the laps of their mothers	25
Many sisters and brothers,	
Like birds in their nest,	
Are ready for rest,	
And sport no more seen	
On the darkening green.	30

Name _____

Date _____

Respond, Recall, Analyze, and Interpret

Use the poem, “The Echoing Green,” to answer the following questions.

1. In line 11, the speaker refers to “Old John.” Do you think this is a real person?

2. In line 2, the skies are referred to as “happy.” What do you think this description means? Why would “happy” be used to describe the skies?

3. What is the setting for this poem?

4. Describe the speaker. What kind of character might he/she be?

5. What are the “old folk” doing?

6. In the last stanza, what are the “little ones” doing?

7. To what are old age and youth being compared in this poem? Why?

Apply Through Writing

Think about a sad, funny, interesting or exciting event that has taken place in your life or in the world around you. Consider three or four main points about the event that a reader would need to know in order to make sense of your ideas. Now, write a narrative poem with or without lines that rhyme, using each of the main points as a central idea for each stanza.

Name _____

Date _____

Research Application

Use a website on the Internet such as Lyrics.com to make a list of your 10 favorite songs. Determine whether the lyrics to the songs form narrative poems. If so, tell what the story of the song is about. Use the following chart to record your answers.

Song Title	Narrative Poem? (Yes or No)	This Song Tells a Story About...

Name _____

Date _____

Answer Key

Respond, Recall, Analyze and Interpret

Answers may vary, but the following should be used as a general guideline.

1. Old John is likely a person who the speaker sees, but who he/she may not know the real name for. Old John serves as a representative of all of the older people sitting together in a group under a tree.
2. The word happy is used to describe the skies because it is morning and the sun is rising. As the sun rises, nothing is dark and black any longer, but rather light, free, awake, joyous and vibrant. The word happy, though, is a simple word that a child might use.
3. The setting for this poem is a quiet rural area where there is likely a small neighborhood overlooking vast fields of green grass. It is a tranquil area where there are no stores, traffic, and noise.
4. The speaker is a child. We know this because he/she refers to him/herself in line 15 as one of the people playing.
5. The old folk are gathered together sitting in the shade of a tree as they see children playing. They are remembering a time when they all were young children themselves.
6. The children in the last stanza have worn themselves out from playing all day. In the last stanza, it is evening, and the children are seeking rest and comfort curled up on their mothers' laps.
7. Old age and youth are compared to day and night in this poem. Youth is a happy time with lots of activity, like the dawn of life. Old age is a time when darkness sets in, like the night, and the only thing left to look forward to is seeing tomorrow, a new dawn that is a happy time for the children.