

Narrative

(Contributed By Mark Leidner)

When people write fiction, whether in the form of the short story or in a longer work, the main considerations of, the organizing principles of, and/or the “driver” in the work is usually some combination of the following classic fictional aspects: character development, plot, and description of scene. Most, if not all, great works of fiction generally follow the formula: introduction, initial complication, rising action, climax, resolution – or something along those lines.

Narrative in poetry, however, is different. It doesn’t have to be different, and many successful narrative poems implement many, if not all, of the aforementioned tropes of prose fiction. So what’s the difference between narrative prose, and a narrative poem? Usually, it is the driver, or the organizing principle that is different. All the things we have talked about that can “drive” a poem – image, sound, rhythm, juxtaposition, a formal rule, etc – are the primary considerations (primary over character, plot, and scene) in narrative poetry.

Your assignment is to write a narrative poem – a poem that tells some sort of story – in which there are “characters” (interpret that as loosely as you like), there is a “plot” (interpret that as loosely as you like), and there is “scenery” (interpret that as loosely as you like) – but in which those three elements are NOT the primary drivers of the poem. Try to allow the sound of the words to overtake the sense of the narrative. I urge you, desperately, do NOT sit down with a story already in mind, which you are interested in laying down on the page. It will be much more productive, and fun, to sit down with no idea what story you’re going to tell, or what is going to happen in the story. Then just write the first thing that pops into your head, and try to “brainstorm” a story – letting the sound of the words, or the rhythm of the language, or some other “poetic” aspect determine where the story goes.

1) Your story does not have to make sense. Your story does not have to make sense. Your story does not have to make sense. Your story does not have to make sense. Your story does not have to make sense.

Another common pitfall: 2) Try to avoid *explaining the meaning* of your story, or your poem, or any particular image! Let the story stand for itself. Don’t say, “Brenda wept and pounded her fist against the wall because she was frustrated and angry.” Just say, “Brenda wept. Brenda pounded her fist against the wall.”

3) Your story doesn’t have to resolve itself. Remember our discussion about poems that end with resolution, and poems that end with anti-resolution? Both are equally fine ways to end poems. Resist the urge to tie everything up at the end with a pretty, little bow that makes everything fit into a neat, little package!

4) As for content, go buck wild. Do not settle for a merely quirky, sad little story about the heartbreak and angst of college-age students set in a quaint, Midwestern coffee shop. Get crazy. Have your story take place on the moon, in the center of the sun, or, maybe, Illinois. New York. New Jersey. Africa. Have your characters be something wild and unpredictable. Tell a story about a talking blow-dryer who befriends and then betrays a giant silver tree in the middle of a golden forest on a planet that never existed. These, of course, are just examples (don’t be so lazy as to actually use them – think of your own) of how there are no rules, in terms of content and context for this narrative, that you are required follow – except one: surprise yourself. Write something that *you* would never have predicted you would write.

5) Your story does *not* have to be *linear* – in terms of *sense* or *chronology*. Feel free to leap around in time and space as you see fit!