

Narrative Poetry

Narrative poetry is easily distinguished from other forms of poetry because it has a “story” which unfolds through a sequence of events. Typically, a narrative is longer than other poems which may be limited to a specific length of lines or specific format. A narrative is often more memorable because its story contains colorful characters or extraordinary events.

Many of the famous narrative poems you will read in high school include the ancient Greek and Roman epics including Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Virgil’s *The Aeneid*.

Many narratives have recorded specific historic events. Some other famous examples include the following:

- Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade”
- Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride”
- John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Barbara Frietchie”

Other narratives tell a story that commemorates someone who has died.

- Robert Frost’s “Death of the Hired Hand”
- Robert Service’s “The Cremation of Sam McGee”

Other narrative poems are more specific in the focus of a holiday celebration or season. Some of the more famous narrative poems include the following:

- Moore’s “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”
- Seuss’ “The Grinch”
- Longfellow’s “Christmas Bells”

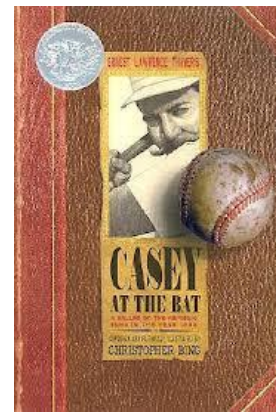
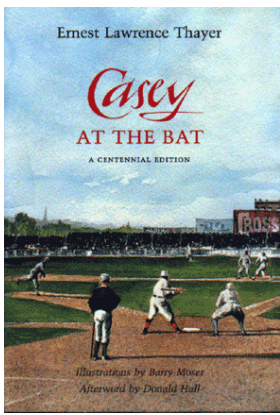
Still other narrative poems are specifically sad and/or romantic in their stories. These narrative poems are **ballads**. Some famous ballads include the following:

Alfred Noyes “The Highwayman”

“Lord Randall”

“My Bonnie Barbara Allen”

Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”



Casey at the Bat

by Ernest Lawrence Thayer ©

The Outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day:
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;
They thought, if only Casey could get but a whack at that -
We'd put up even money, now, with Casey at the bat.

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,
And the former was a lulu and the latter was a cake;
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,
And Blake, the much despis-ed, tore the cover off the ball;
And when the dust had lifted, and the men saw what had occurred,
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from 5,000 throats and more there rose a lusty yell;
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.

Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped-
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;
And it's likely they'd a-killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two."

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud;
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.

The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate;
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.

Quick Questions

1. When and where is the setting of the poem? How can you tell?
2. Who is the speaker of the poem? What clues enable you to determine the speaker's identity?
3. What is the poem's subject? What or how is the subject matter developed?
4. What is the tone or mood of the poem in the first three stanzas?
5. When, where, how, and why does the tone of the poem change?
6. What is the reputation of Casey, and how does it impact the crowd's expectations?
7. Explain the poem's irony.
8. Why is the word "somewhere" repeated four times in the final stanza? How does it intensify the poem's irony?
9. If there is a purpose in this narrative poem, what might its theme, moral, or lesson be?

More Narrative Poetry

Dr. Seuss' **The Sneetches**

Now, the Star-Bell Sneetches had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches had none upon thars.
Those stars weren't so big. They were really so small
You might think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches
Would brag, "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches."
With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort
"We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!"
And, whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
They'd hike right on past them without even talking.

When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,
Could a Plain Belly get in the game? Not at all.
You only could play if your bellies had stars
And the Plain-Belly children had none upon thars.

When the Star Belly Sneetches had frankfurter roasts
Or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,
They never invited the Plain-Belly Sneetches
They left them out cold, in the dark of the beaches.
They kept them away. Never let them come near.
And that's how they treated them year after year.

Then ONE day, it seems while the Plain-Belly Sneetches
Were moping and dopping alone on the beaches,
Just sitting there wishing their bellies had stars,
A stranger zipped up in the strangest of cars!

"My friends", he announced in a voice clear and clean,
"My name is Sylvester McMonkey McBean. And I've heard of
Your troubles. I've heard you're unhappy. But I can fix
That I'm the Fix-It-Up Chappie. I've come here to help
You. I have what you need. And my prices are low. And
I work with great speed. And my work is one hundred per cent guaranteed!"

Then, quickly, Sylvester McMonkey McBean
Put together a very peculiar machine.
And he said, "You want stars like a Star-Belly Sneetch? My friends, you can
Have them for three dollars each!"

"Just pay me your money and hop right aboard!"
So they clambered inside. Then the big machine roared.
And it klonked. And it bonked. And it jerked. And it berked.
And it bopped them about. But the thing really worked!
When the Plain-Belly Sneetches popped out, they had stars!
They actually did. They had stars upon thars!



Then they yelled at the ones who had stars at the start,
“We’re still the best Sneetches and they are the worst.
But now, how in the world will we know”, they all frowned,
“If which kind is what, or the other way round?”

Then up came McBean with a very sly wink. And he said, “Things
are not quite as bad as you think. So you don’t know who’s who.
That is perfectly true. But come with me, friends. Do you know
what I’ll do? I’ll make you, again, the best Sneetches on the beaches.
And all it will cost you is ten dollars eaches.”

“Belly stars are no longer in style”, said McBean.
“What you need is a trip through my Star-Off Machine. This
Wondrous contraption will take OFF your stars so you won’t
Look like Sneetches that have them on thars.”
And that handy machine working very precisely
Removed all the stars from their tummies quite nicely.

Then, with snoots in the air, they paraded about. And they opened
Their beaks and they let out a shout, “We know who is who! Now there
Isn’t a doubt. The best kind of Sneetches are Sneetches without!”

Then, of course, those with stars got all frightfully mad.
To be wearing a star was frightfully bad. Then, of course, old
Sylvester McMonkey McBean invited THEM into his Star-Off Machine.

Then, of course from THEN on, as you probably guess,
Things really got into a horrible mess.

All the rest of that day, on those wild screaming beaches,
The Fix-It-Up Chappie kept fixing up Sneetches.
Off again! On again! In again! Out again!
Through the machines they raced round and about again,
Changing their stars every minute or two. They kept paying money.
They kept running through until the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew
Whether this one was that one or that one was this one. Or which one
Was what one or what one was who.

Then, when every last cent of their money was spent,
The Fix-It-Up Chappie packed up. And he went. And he laughed as he drove
In his car up the beach, “They never will learn. No. You can’t
Teach a Sneetch!”

But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say.
That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day.
The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches.
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.
That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether
They had one, or not, upon thars.

Quick questions

1. Who is the speaker of the poem? How can you determine the speaker’s identity?
2. Describe the setting and characters in this allegorical poem’s first 4 stanzas.
3. What is the cause of the conflict?
4. What change causes a rising action in this narrative poem’s story?

5. What motivates Mr. McMonkey McBean? Does he show bias?
6. What cycle occurs, and how does it impact the sneetches?
7. How have stars been used as positive symbols? By whom? When/ Where?
8. How have stars been used as negative symbols? By whom? When/ Where?
9. In the end, what do the stars represent to the Sneetches?
10. Explain the irony of the poem.
11. If there is a purpose in this narrative poem, what might its theme, moral, or lesson be?



Illustration for "Barbara Frietche"!

Barbara Frietche by John Greenleaf Whittier

Up from the meadows rich with corn,
Clear in the cool September morn,

The clustered spires of Frederick stand
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.

Round about them orchards sweep,
Apple and peach tree fruited deep,

Fair as the garden of the Lord
To the eyes of the famished rebel horde,

On that pleasant morn of the early
fall
When Lee marched over the
mountain-wall;

Over the mountains winding down,
Horse and foot, into Frederick town.

Forty flags with their silver stars,
Forty flags with their crimson bars,

Flapped in the morning wind: the sun
Of noon looked down, and saw not
one.



Up rose old Barbara Fritchie then,
Bowed with her fourscore years and ten;

Bravest of all in Frederick town,
She took up the flag the men hauled down;

In her attic window the staff she set,
To show that one heart was loyal yet,

Up the street came the rebel tread,
Stonewall Jackson riding ahead.

Under his slouched hat left and right
He glanced; the old flag met his sight.

'Halt!' - the dust-brown ranks stood fast.
'Fire!' - out blazed the rifle-blast.

It shivered the window, pane and sash;
It rent the banner with seam and gash.

Quick, as it fell, from the broken staff
Dame Barbara snatched the silken scarf.

She leaned far out on the window-sill,
And shook it forth with a royal will.

'Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,
But spare your country's flag,' she said.

A shade of sadness, a blush of shame,
Over the face of the leader came;

The nobler nature within him stirred
To life at that woman's deed and word;

'Who touches a hair of yon gray head
Dies like a dog! March on! he said.

All day long through Frederick street
Sounded the tread of marching feet:

All day long that free flag tost
Over the heads of the rebel host.

Ever its torn folds rose and fell
On the loyal winds that loved it well;

And through the hill-gaps sunset light
Shone over it with a warm good-night.

Barbara Frietchie's work is o'er,
And the Rebel rides on his raids nor more.

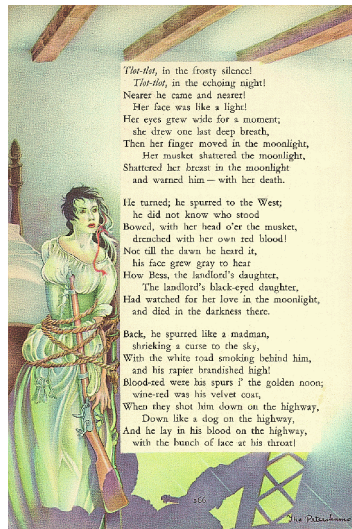
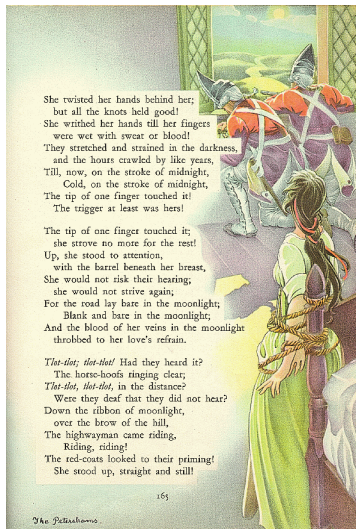
Honor to her! and let a tear
Fall, for her sake, on Stonewalls' bier.

Over Barbara Frietchie's grave,
Flag of Freedom and Union, wave!

Peace and order and beauty draw
Round thy symbol of light and law;

And ever the stars above look down
On thy stars below in Frederick town!

More Narrative Poetry



Alfred Noyes' **The Highwayman**

The Highwayman

The wind was a torrent of darkness upon the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight looping the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding--
Riding--riding--
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

He'd a French cocked hat on his forehead, and a bunch of lace at his chin;
He'd a coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of fine doe-skin.
They fitted with never a wrinkle; his boots were up to his thigh!
And he rode with a jeweled twinkle--
His rapier hilt a-twinkle--
His pistol butts a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
He tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred,
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter--
Bess, the landlord's daughter--
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

Dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim, the ostler listened--his face was white and peaked--
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay,
But he loved the landlord's daughter--
The landlord's black-eyed daughter;
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say:

"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart; I'm after a prize tonight,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light.

Yet if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way."

He stood upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair in the casement! His face burnt like a brand
As the sweet black waves of perfume came tumbling o'er his breast,
Then he kissed its waves in the moonlight
(O sweet black waves in the moonlight!),
And he tugged at his reins in the moonlight, and galloped away to the west.

He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon.
And out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon,
When the road was a gypsy's ribbon over the purple moor,
The redcoat troops came marching--
Marching--marching--
King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.

They said no word to the landlord; they drank his ale instead,
But they gagged his daughter and bound her to the foot of her narrow bed.
Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets by their side;
There was Death at every window,
And Hell at one dark window,
For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that he would ride.

They had bound her up at attention, with many a sniggering jest!
They had tied a rifle beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast!
"Now keep good watch!" and they kissed her. She heard the dead man say,
"Look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though Hell should bar the way."

She twisted her hands behind her, but all the knots held good!
She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood!
They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours crawled by like years,
Till, on the stroke of midnight,
Cold on the stroke of midnight,
The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

The tip of one finger touched it, she strove no more for the rest;
Up, she stood up at attention, with the barrel beneath her breast.
She would not risk their hearing, she would not strive again,
For the road lay bare in the moonlight,
Blank and bare in the moonlight,
And the blood in her veins, in the moonlight, throbbed to her love's refrain.

Tlot tlot, tlot tlot! Had they heard it? The horse-hooves, ringing clear;
Tlot tlot, tlot tlot, in the distance! Were they deaf that they did not hear?
Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
The highwayman came riding--

Riding--riding--
The redcoats looked to their priming! She stood up straight and still.

Tlot tlot, in the frosty silence! Tlot tlot, in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!
Her eyes grew wide for a moment, she drew one last deep breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight--
Her musket shattered the moonlight--
Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him--with her death.

He turned, he spurred to the West; he did not know who stood
Bowed, with her head o'er the casement, drenched in her own red blood!
Not till the dawn did he hear it, and his face grew grey to hear
How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and died in the darkness there.

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!
Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon, wine-red was his velvet coat
When they shot him down in the highway,
Down like a dog in the highway,
And he lay in his blood in the highway, with the bunch of lace at his throat.

*And still on a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a gypsy's ribbon looping the purple moor,
The highwayman comes riding--
Riding--riding--
The highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.*

*Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard,
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