

Old Stories, New Tellings

A lesson in narrative & poetry

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Poetry has a complicated relationship with narrative that escapes summation. Any given poem may be dominated by or completely absent of an overarching narrative. Narratives may enter the poem through a passing reference to a well-known event or through subtle patterns of character citation and interaction. It is best to call narrative a helpful tool in a poet's arsenal. Narrative can serve purposes of grounding and creating momentum in a poem, but such functions can sometimes be achieved through other means.

However, narrative remains one of the easiest ways for students to enter poetry. Reading is heavily associated with the telling of stories; when a student unfamiliar with poetry begins reading literature, they will follow an impulse to 'understand what's going on' – to find and follow a story. As a student becomes more familiar with poetry, they can use these identified stories as foundations upon which to analyze non-narrative elements of the text. Ultimately, the familiarity with analyzing those non-narrative elements should allow a student to approach and enjoy poems with only the slightest hints of narrative structure.

With this context in mind, Maggie Smith's *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* offers a wonderful range of narrative-poem relationships and provides entry points for readers of all levels. Smith's text often cites fairy tales and common suburban childhood experiences to instill the work with familiarity. The power of her work lies in its ability to tie these narratives to convincing emotional responses; childhood wonder and urgency exist alongside retrospective identification of danger and loss. Students are likely to appreciate the eerie atmosphere that Smith wraps around familiar stories. In such a way, *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* offers a fantastic entry point into nuanced, complex poetry that students will find both accessible and rewarding.

This lesson fulfills the following objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify a narrative in a poem and outline the events that make up that narrative.
2. Students will be able to identify non-narrative elements of a poem.
3. Students will be able to analyze the relationship between narrative & non-narrative elements in a poem by identifying ideas, images or emotions shared by such elements.
4. Students will be able to construct a narrative poem that uses non-narrative elements to enhance the poem's narrative through expansion or juxtaposition.

Homework assigned to prepare for this class:

Each student must take a popular children's story of their choice (fairy tale, children's movie, story videogame, or a young adult novel), list its main characters, and outline its plot in 5 – 10 bulleted events.

Lesson Structure:

1. **Opening Journal:** Get out your homework and identify the most important event in the plot outline. Then write a journal entry that addresses the following two questions (~10 minutes):
 - a. Why is the event the important?
 - b. How does your chosen event affect the rest of the story? (Does it make earlier events more meaningful or set up other important events to happen?)
2. **Creative Writing Warm-Up:** Write a short poem about the event you've chosen. In addition to simply telling a story about what happened, try to describe what is occurring in depth. How does the setting look? What are the characters in the scene thinking? Is there a meaning to the scene that you can highlight by using specific words or phrases to describe it? (~10 minutes)
3. **Creative Writing Mini-Workshop:** Swap poems with a partner and create an outline of what happens in their poem. What moment in the poem seems most important? What description in the poem seems the most important? How does the moment and the description seem to match up? (~6 minutes) *After reading, outlining and thinking about the poem, one partner will tell the other what they saw happening in the poem. (~2 minutes) Then, the other partner will discuss what they saw happening in the other poem. (~3 minutes)*

RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 30 MINUTES

4. **Introduction to *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*:** *Class retrieves and opens The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison. Discussion: Which story is being referenced? If/ when the class cannot get it, use gradual hints – fairytale, girl alone in the woods, pointing out lines about being devoured / hunted – to push class towards Red Riding Hood. Discussion: How does the poet show us the story, or narrative? How does the non-narrative language communicate ideas about the narrative itself? (~7 minutes)*
5. **Reading *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*:** *The class turns to page 18 of The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison: Notes on Camp. Before you read, write down everything you know about summer camp in three minutes. (~3 minutes) Then, read the poem and try to create an outline of the events that occur in the poem. (~ 6 minutes) Discussion: Look at your list. Which things that your wrote down about summer camp did you think of when you read the poem? What story is the poem trying to tell? When you imagine the poem happening, is there anything you picture that isn't given to you directly through the poem itself? (~7 minutes).*
6. **Mini-Analysis:** Write a paragraph about what you think the poem means. Cite at least one specific line in the poem to back up your point. Also, writing at least one sentence talking about how your knowledge / experience of camp affects you as a reader of the poem. *Due to the complexity of this mini-assignment, it may be helpful to bullet it out on the board, like so:*
 - a. Overall meaning
 - b. 1 or more quotes from poem to back it up

- c. How your own experience / knowledge of camp affects the meaning you got

RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 60 MINUTES

7. **Analysis Reflection:** *Students share their mini-analyses. They may either read their writing directly, paraphrase, or respond to other students' analyses. Discussion Questions:* What does the title do for the poem? How does the line "Every year it's the same" affect how we read this story? Do the characters seem to exist more as groups and individuals, and how does this affect the poem? How does the speaker of the poem fit into the story? What is the most important moment in the poem? Why does it end with Turtleman? (~10 minutes)
8. **Creative Writing Wrap-Up:** Look back to your original poem and rewrite it, using even more imagery or literary device to stand in for direct narration of the story. If you need to, try to outline your old poem and figure out which points in the outline can be conveyed through image or literary device. (~5 minutes)
9. **Assign Homework:** *Students skim poems in *The Well Speaks of its Own Poison* for one they are particularly interested in. They then outline the poem and note specific lines and moments they found powerful. They write a paragraph explaining how their favorite moments relate to the overarching narrative of the poem.*

Critical Essay: *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* (Recommended essay length: 3 – 5 pages)

In *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*, Maggie Smith consistently weaves familiar stories with non-narrative language. For this assignment, you'll perform a close reading of one poem by focusing on relationship between these two elements. You are crafting an argument that cites evidence within the poem to defend your impression of what Smith is trying to communicate to the reader. While preparing to write the essay, you should do the following:

1. **Identify and summarize the 'plot' of the poem.** It may be helpful to look for elements like character and setting if you're struggling with this step. If you can't identify a 'plot,' choose a different poem.
2. **Identify pieces of non-narrative language within the poem that strike you as important and analyze them.** What do these non-narrative pieces of language add to the poem – emotion, ideas, imagery, sound, or something else? Are there patterns you can see in the way non-narrative language is being used in the poem?
3. **Analyze the relationship between narrative (plot) and non-narrative language in the poem. This analysis will be summed up in your thesis statement and will stand as the main focus of your paper.** Once you have completed steps one and two, you should be left with notes on the poem regarding its narrative and non-narrative elements. It's now your job as a close reader to find meaning in these notes. An example thesis might look as follows: "Throughout "Vanishing Point," Smith uses question marks and imagery of disappearance to highlight the terror of the unknown that runs through its core Red Riding Hood narrative."

Throughout the writing process, it's highly recommended that you use brainstorming, outlining, drafting and revising processes to ensure you turn in a polished assignment. Peer reviewing, reading your paper out loud and rewriting difficult-to-edit sections of your paper will be especially helpful here. The best way to make sure the assignment goes smoothly is to start out by picking a poem that you enjoy and understand. Good luck!

Assignment Rubric:

Presence of a strong, clear thesis:	____ / 15
Provision of relevant evidence:	____ / 25
Analysis & defense of evidence:	____ / 35
Structure:	____ / 15
Grammar & Mechanics:	____ / 10
Total:	____ / 100

Creative Project: *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*

(Recommended Lesson Planning: 1 – 2 In-Class Peer Review Sessions)

In this creative project, you will choose a story or set of stories (for example, a novel, film, folk tale, set of folk tales, a set of episodes from a television series) and write a chapbook using that story or set of stories as a narrative thread. A chapbook is a short collection of poetry. For this assignment you will create a chapbook of at least eight pages of poetry; you may also include one page of notes to explain certain story-specific terms or references.* You will also write a short reflection of at least two pages that will accomplish three things:

1. Explain your aesthetic choices for the project as a whole – why you chose the story and how you attempted to add to or comment upon it through your poetry
2. Provides a short close reading of one of your poems in the chapbook
3. Cite one tactic Maggie Smith uses in *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* as a source for technical inspiration

You should view this project as a way to reconstruct a favorite story of yours by bringing your own ideas and feelings about the story into the space of the poem. This doesn't mean that you'll be writing anything along the lines of "I liked this because..." in your poems, but rather that you'll want to write poems about the settings, characters, and events that you liked that use language to highlight their most interesting or beautiful aspects. You may even end up writing several poems with every little narrative at all, pieces that zoom in on specific characters, settings or ideas within the work to explore their complexities or put them in new situations of your own choosing.

Due to the intense creative energy required to write a chapbook, it's best to get started early. Choose your story and refresh your memory on it ahead of time, and start writing your first poems as soon as possible. This will give you plenty of time and mental space to sharpen them before turning in the project. While editing, here are some great questions to ask yourself:

- a. Which part of the poem is your favorite? Is there something happening in that part of the poem that can spread to the rest of the poem and make the entire thing better?
- b. What seems to be the overall point of the poem? Are there any parts of the poem that don't contribute to conveying or capturing this point?
- c. What kind of form did you use for the poem? Are there any ways you could lay it out on the page that might be more fitting to the subject or make the poem more exciting to read?

Reflecting on these questions actively throughout the writing process will strengthen your poetry and also make writing your reflection easier. Remember to leave plenty of time to revise both your poetry and reflection before turning them in.

This is designed to be an enjoyable project. Be sure to pick a story or set of stories that you really love; you might be able to think back to a movie or book that you and your friends talk or have talked about excitedly right after it came out. Incorporate the themes of your chosen book into your choices regarding visual design, whether by adding artwork, color, or simply choosing a fitting font. I highly encourage you to get access to your story so you can re-watch or reread it for reference and inspiration. The magic of the story should get your mind racing; your task is put your fingers to the keyboard and let the energy flow into the page. Good luck!

*One important thing to keep in mind: **your reader should be able to mostly understand what is happening in the work without having read or seen the story you are working off of.** There may be cases in regards to vocabulary and specific story references where adding a note at the end can solve this gap of understanding. There is a fine line between providing the reader enough information and leaving the poem up to the reader's imagination; peer editing will be very helpful during this project for that reason. Additionally, ordering your chapbook so that the reader can follow along with your stories will be an important point of focus as well.

Assignment Rubric:

Chapbook Design:	_____ / 5
Chapbook Content:	_____ / 65
Narrative Clarity & Expansion:	_____ / 25
Poetry Effort & Polish:	_____ / 40
Reflection Content:	_____ / 25
Reflection on Chapbook Aesthetics:	_____ / 10
Close Reading:	_____ / 10
<i>Well</i> Tactic Tie-In:	_____ / 5
Overall Grammar & Mechanics:	_____ / 5
Total:	_____ / 100