

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.*