

CHAPTER TWO

CLASSIFICATION OF POETRY

Poetry can generally be classified into Narrative and Lyric.

A. Narrative Poetry

A narrative poem is a poem that tells a story, relating a series of events. It is poetry that has a plot. The poem may be short or long, and the story it relates may be simple or complex. It is usually non-dramatic, with objective regular scheme and meter. The following lines from William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" can be considered as an example of a narrative poem.

*When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "weep! weep! weep! weep!"
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep*

In the above lines of Blake's poem we read the story of a kid. The events we have in the story of the poem are that the mother of the speaker died when he/she was young, and then he/she was sold by his/her father at this young age when he couldn't even know how to cry, to someone who made him work and sleep in the kitchen (your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep). So we see that the poem focuses on telling us what happened (the sequence of events/happenings) rather than dramatizing it or rather than focusing on expression of feelings.

Although any brief poem that tells a story may be considered as a narrative poem, the two most familiar forms of narrative poetry are the **Epic** and **Ballad**.

Epic Poems recount the accomplishments of heroic figures, typically including expansive settings, superhuman feats, and gods and supernatural beings. The language of epic poems tends to be formal, even elevated, and often quite elaborate. An epic is a long narrative poem on a serious subject chronicling heroic deeds and important events. In the literature of the western world, narrative poetry began during the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (composed before 2000 B.C) and Homer's epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (composed before 700 B.C).

Epics deal with legendary or historical events of national or universal significance, involving action of broad sweep and grandeur. Most epics deal with the exploits of a single individual, thereby giving unity to the composition. Typically, an epic includes several features: the introduction of supernatural forces that shape the action; conflict in the form of battles or other physical combat; and stylistic conventions such as an invocation to the Muse, a formal statement of the theme, long lists of the protagonists involved, and set speeches couched in elevated language. Commonplace details of everyday life may appear, but they serve as background for the story and are described in the same lofty style as the rest of the poem.

as an example of epic poetry, you can read the following lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Although his work was later criticized by such authors as English poet William Blake and American-born English poet T. S. Eliot, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is still considered the greatest epic poem of early modern English literature. This excerpt is from Book I, which explains the origin of the conflict between God and Satan. Milton's portrayal of Satan is unique—a character with real

motivations and desires, Satan is led astray by excessive pride and belief in his own power over God's power. In the first lines of the poem, Milton follows the convention in epic poems of invoking the Muses, the Greek goddesses that inspired poets, musicians, and philosophers, and he explains his purpose in writing the poem.

*Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth
Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.*

----- (Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2009)

The Ballad is another type of narrative poetry with roots in an oral tradition. Originally intended to be sung, a ballad uses repeated words and phrases, including a refrain, to advance its story.

It is a short narrative folk song that fixes on the most dramatic part of a story, moving to its conclusion by means of dialogue and a series of incidents. The word *ballad* was first used in a general sense to mean a simple short poem. Such a poem could be narrative or lyric, sung or not sung, crude or polite, sentimental or satiric, religious or secular; it was vaguely associated with dance. The word is still commonly used in this loose fashion. In the field of folklore, however, *ballad* is applied specifically to the kind of narrative folk song described in the opening lines. These narrative songs represent a type of literature and music that developed across Europe in the late Middle Ages. Unlike the medieval romances and rhymed tales, ballads tend to have a tight dramatic structure that sometimes omits all preliminary material, all exposition and description, even all motivation, to focus on the

climactic scene. It is as though the ballad presented only the last act of a play, leaving the listener or reader to supply the antecedent material.

B. Lyric Poetry

Lyric Poetry consists of a poem, such as a **sonnet** or an **ode**, that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. The term lyric is now commonly referred to as the words to a song. **Lyric poetry does not tell a story which portrays characters and actions.** The lyric poet addresses the reader directly, portraying his or her own feeling, state of mind, and perceptions. The following is an example of lyric poetry:

Dying by Emily Dickinson

I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heavens of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,
And breaths were gathering sure
For that last onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me I
Could make assignable,-and then
There interposed a fly,

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see.

C. Dramatic Poetry

Dramatic poetry refers to any lyric work that employs elements of drama such as dialogue, conflict, or characterization, but excluding works that are intended for stage presentation. A Monologue is a form of dramatic poetry.

(www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/glossary/glossary_de.htm)

Dramatic poetry like narrative poetry, tells stories. But in dramatic poetry, the poet lets one or more of the story's characters act out the story. Many plays are written as dramatic

poetry. The difference between drama and dramatic poetry is a matter of degree. ...
(www.worldbook.com/wb/Students)

To be, or not to be (*from Hamlet 3/1*)

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. - Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.