Inescapable Stories: The Infiltration of Narrative into Non-Narrative Poetry

Steve Evans

Department of English

Abstract

Narrative permeates our lives, often without our noticing. We commonly recognise it in conventional arenas of storytelling, such as in the oral tradition, or in prose and film. There is also a long-held classification, narrative poetry within that particular literary art. I am exploring how narrative exists in more subtle expressions, especially within so-called lyric poetry. Can a supposedly non-narrative poem perform a narrative function? Is each haiku a mini-series waiting to unfold? Can we ever escape from telling stories?

Introduction

We live in a world saturated with stories, some of which we barely pause to acknowledge even at the moment that we are creating them. We create them to explain the world as we encounter it in both the everyday (such mundane acts as recounting gossip or the incidents of a shopping excursion) and the extraordinary (telling acts of heroism or betrayal). In telling others about our experiences, we construct short narratives with plots and characters and dramatic embellishments, frequently featuring ourselves in the starring roles (Branigan 1992, p. 1; Labov 1997, Online). As the film reviewer, Adrian Martin, said, ‘even the most banal of personal stories is high melodrama to those caught in it’ (2003, p. A3-11). We sometimes do not consciously think of these acts as storytelling, so ingrained is the practice.

I am using the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ more or less interchangeably at this stage, though theorists would quibble. For my purposes at present, this differentiation is not critical, but I will need to come back to it. If it does not seem too much cart-before-horse, I would argue that it is sufficient and more important at this point to recognise that narrative permeates our lives and that, as literary theorist, Roland Barthes, states, it takes many forms:

The narratives of the world are numberless...Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation...narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself.

Barthes 1977, p. 79

I will return to this too later. Before that, however, I want to emphasise that I am interested in one particular story that pervades our culture; one that often plays an important role in the construction of our identities, both personal and social—the wedding story. I will look at how it is capable of being conveyed in the smallest parcels of text, and at how it is capable of being easily unpacked (or perhaps in this highly computerised age that should now be ‘unzipped’).

Prose with a clearly linear story line or so-called narrative poetry would conventionally be expected to act as vehicles of complete narrative. I would argue that the narrative function can also be performed by less obvious and often much more minimal texts. In particular, poetry that is usually regarded as specifically non-narrative can perform a clearly narrative role.
We encounter the wedding narrative so frequently that most of us can automatically reconstitute its typical shape from very few clues, or fragments, in a text. That is to say, the necessary elements need not always be found in the texts themselves but might be largely contributed by the reader. This approach is broadly consistent with that of the cognitivist school, which argues that readers are a vital part of the process of constructing story since they necessarily bring their experiences and attitudes and expectations to bear on each reading. At least one noted cognitive theorist, however, denies lyric poetry a narrative function (Branigan 1992, pp. 1, 7). So, how to make a case for my claim?

**The World in a Bean**

Various theorists have argued that stories can be analysed in a way that reveals their shared features, and that these features can then be used to allow construction of a workable model of narrative. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, proposes that there are five stages of causal transformation evident in a basic narrative (Branigan 1992, p. 4):

1. state of equilibrium at the outset;
2. disruption of the equilibrium by some action;
3. recognition that there has been some disruption;
4. attempt to repair the disruption;
5. reinstatement of the initial equilibrium.

He argues that these are characteristic of a typical narrative and should be readily identifiable. Similar sequences or patterns of events underpin the models put forward by Campbell (1968) and Vogler (1992), the latter specifically in relation to movies. The various models vary in detail but basically adhere to a three-step process of stability/instability/stability, where some sort of calm is broken and must be restored.

In Vladimir Propp’s case, he held out a claim for such a model but only in relation to the specific body of Russian wonder tales—or fairy stories—that formed the basis of his study, a qualification that is often overlooked. Regarding this method of examining large numbers of texts in order to establish some rule, Roland Barthes, commented:

> There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world’s stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure.

Barthes 1974, p.3

In general, Barthes’ argument is a counter to the one-size-fits-all approach that is assumed from, if not by, much structuralist analysis. He says that we cannot identify a ‘great narrative structure’ by examining all stories and trying to extract a common model out of analysing every one. Firstly, the task is too great—there are just too many stories—and, secondly, this kind of all-encompassing narrative structure simply does not exist. Common features might be identified, but that does not entitle us to say that there is a mother narrative, so to speak.
Instead of such a reductionist outcome, Barthes says we need to recognise that narrative is born in the practice of writing itself, and that the resulting text is an interactive network of possibilities (produced between text and reader) rather than a single, rule-bound artifact. For this ‘plural text there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar or a logic’ (Barthes 1974, pp. 4-6). Are those page numbers correct??

Now, I am not attempting to discover a lens through which to see the single pattern that unites all narrative or the formula of such organisation, if there were such a thing. Too many others have failed to produce a unifying model already, and there is, besides, a certain appeal in the idea of having several alternative approaches at the ready. We can then choose whichever seems the most appropriate device at the time, trying this tool or that in order to unbundle the narrative at hand, while recognising that each application is necessarily an individual and temporary one.

Nor am I attempting to construct the world from an atom. With due respect to Barthes, however, I do think, that even if the whole may not be perfectly glimpsed in the part (the landscape in the bean), we will always comprehend something greater than the more modest material immediately before us. And if we do not see the landscape in the bean, we might at least see the beanplant, and even sense the vegetable garden.

To begin with, I will be looking at a small number of haiku, that celebrated minimalist form of Japanese poetry, though in its westernised guise. The challenge posed by using haiku for this analysis is twofold: the poems are very short and, therefore offer little information; and haiku are traditionally written for descriptive and meditative, rather than deliberately narrative, purposes. Nonetheless, I hope to establish that narrative does indeed exist in quite unheralded places, so much so that it might be said to be inescapable.

The Reader’s Codebook

A given text does not stand on its own. It is the product in many ways of not only antecedent literary works but also each particular reader’s sensitivities and knowledge. The meaning of each text is forever a work in progress, constructed from the union of these ingredients (see Barthes 1974, p. 11, for instance). As readers then, we bring some extra ingredients to the reading process that would enable a relatively abbreviated reference in the text to be expanded into a fuller account. In the case of the wedding story, we each carry a codebook built up from our prior exposure to other wedding stories, fictional or real, and some of the cultural expectations and values associated with weddings in our society.

Barthes also says that narrative is more than the words in which we seek to discover it: ‘Structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentences’ (1977, p. 84). We can conclude from his further writing that he was mainly referring to the fact that for meaning to be conjured, there are two other essential factors; the relationship of those sentences to each other, and the very sense that this relationship makes in its resonance with a reader. To put it more explicitly, we need meaning in order to produce narrative, and we need a reader to create that meaning—from his or her personal reaction to the sequence of words; driven by his or her own experiences, attitudinal biases, knowledge, artistic preferences, and so on. It follows that the narrative relies upon but is ultimately constructed outside the text.

Barthes refers to the variety of codes that we bring to reading as a ‘weaving of voices’ (1974, p. 20). Our familiarity with the typical wedding story allows us to understand that a mere reference to confetti, for instance, places us at the site of the wedding itself, and that a reference to the wedding toast places us at the reception, and so on. We have a sense of the
trajectory of the story, its sequence and timing, who plays which roles, and what sort of outcomes are likely. We appreciate, therefore, the dramatic potential when that flow is threatened, or interrupted or actually thrown off course. What might happen if a jealous character were to reveal a past indiscretion of the bride-to-be? What if the bridal ceremony were to be disrupted by the groom’s angry, former lover?

Essentially, I am saying that a story might subsist in or be easily constructed from apparently minimal texts, provided the right information is present for the reader. It is a process of allusion. With longer forms of writing there is a greater chance of sufficient data existing to enable any reasonable person to assemble a story. Why not then test the limits of this notion with one of the smallest forms of complete texts, the haiku. It is tempting to hold a haiku up to the light and to try looking through it to see a grander text. Does Barthes’ argument effectively militate against such an approach?

Before considering that issue, we need to consider for a moment what we mean by this particular poetic form, and to consider its limitations in the context of my enquiry. There are many references to what constitutes haiku, and it is commonly held that its primary task is to reflect upon nature and allow the reader to recreate a moment of realisation (Hackett 1968, Author's Preface; Stewart 1960, p. 122). Haiku is usually described as comprising 17 beats spread over 3 lines, and containing a seasonal reference, though we know that in its original Japanese form the syllable count could include some pauses and accents. The modern, westernised version does not account for this last feature and it can also vary in some other respects, including dispensing with the nature reference (see Weinreich below re senryu). Because the traditional haiku was also specifically intended to present a brief moment for meditation, it could be strongly argued that it was never meant to tell a story. Thus, haiku normally comprise a ‘brief poignant insight into the universality of [the] endless cycle’ of reincarnation and dissolution, and are ‘fleeting responses or impressions which usually illuminate the poet’s awareness’ (Cherry Blossoms 1960, Notes).

On the other hand, what if even such basic and apparently static depictions could be shown to present elements of narrative despite their miniaturism? If that were so, then it might be argued that almost any form of so-called lyric poetry could also be capable of expressing a narrative, since it is arguably more information-rich and complex.

There are some 500 examples of western haiku by Jack Kerouac in a recent book, a collection I selected from my shelves at random for my exercise. In examining the kinds of short poetry that he wrote, the editor, Regina Weinreich, noted:

Haiku’s sister genre, senryu, is defined as following the same form as haiku, but where the latter deals with Nature, senryu is specifically about human nature and human relationships and is often humorous. Technically, haiku contains a seasonal reference; senryu does not. Unlike the more demanding haiku, senryu can employ what Kerouac saw as ‘poetic trickery’: simile, metaphor and personification.

Weinreich in Kerouac 2003, p. xxix
So, we might expect that if a wedding were to be represented in such poetry, it could be in either haiku or senryu. For simplicity, I will use the term haiku, whether or not there is a seasonal reference. Here are a couple of Kerouac’s efforts:

In my medicine cabinet

the winter fly

Has died of old age

Kerouac 2003, p. xxx

Straining at the padlock

the garage doors

At noon

Kerouac 2003, p. xxxi

In a letter to Philip Whalen in 1956, Jack Kerouac wrote that, ‘Haiku is nice but it’s small, I mean, there are a million haikus in one good prose work’ (2003, p. 192). This notion of intensity requires that the reader focuses and appreciates, otherwise the poetic value of the work is undervalued, if not lost altogether. These poems act as snapshots, pictures of moments frozen in time, though they hint at both a before and an after. What then is a narrative, and how might short poems qualify?

Creating Narrative?

I indicated previously that I would be using the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ more or less interchangeably. A distinction is normally made between ‘story’ and ‘plot’, however. Story is the sequence of events as they would unfold in chronological order and without necessarily having regard to their significance; ordinary details would sit, unedited, cheek by jowl with the sinister or joyful. Plot, on the other hand, is the particular selection of events from within that sequence, and the specific order that is employed for the act of telling. Plot is intended to engender drama and tension, whereas story is more a record of ‘fact’ and lacks that purpose. In one sense, plot is what makes a story successful, if it is told well.

Let us go back to the introductory quote from Barthes (‘The narratives of the world are numberless’; 1977, p. 79). A notable omission from his list is poetry, though it seems he did not mean to suggest that it fails as a vehicle for narrative. In fact, he comments that, ‘All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds’—and in a footnote then remarks that ‘this is not the case with either poetry or the essay, both of which are dependent on the cultural level of their consumers’ (1977, p. 79). So, while arguing that the pleasure of narrative in poetry is not always universally acknowledgeable (and I would counter that similar limitations could apply equally to other genres), Barthes admits that there is narrative in (some?) poetry.

He states that there are three broad types of discourse: ‘metonymic (narrative), metaphoric (lyric poetry, sapiental discourse), enthymematic (intellectual discourse)’. Since he distinguishes only lyric poetry as a metaphoric and non-narrative discourse (like Branigan,
1992, p. 7), other poetry would presumably qualify as narrative. In one sense, this is consistent with the historical division of poetry into two major classes; lyric, and narrative. At least it recognises that some poetry has a narrative function, though I feel his approach is too limited.

Almost immediately, however, Barthes says that narrative is more than the words in which we seek to discover it: ‘Structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentences’ (1977, p. 84). We can conclude from his further writing that he was mainly referring to the fact that for meaning to be conjured there are two other essential factors; the relationship of those sentences to each other, and the very sense that this relationship makes in its resonance with a reader. To put it more explicitly, we need meaning in order to produce narrative, and we need a reader to create that meaning—from his or her personal reaction to the sequence of words; driven by his or her own experiences, attitudinal biases, knowledge, artistic preferences, and so on. It follows that the narrative relies upon but is ultimately constructed outside the text. Tzvetan Todorov echoes this:

Every work is rewritten by its reader, who imposes upon it a new grid of interpretation for which he is not generally responsible but which comes to him from his culture, from his time, in short from another discourse; all comprehension is the encounter of two discourses: a dialogue…Hence interpretation is no longer true or false but rich or poor, revealing or sterile, stimulating or dull.

Todorov 1981, p. xxx

Branigan says that, ‘intuitively, we believe that a narrative is more than a mere description of pace or time, and more even than events in a logical or causal sequence’ (1992, p. 4). If the causal connections between successive events are evident but weak, then we might say that no functioning narrative exists. Succinctly, he says, ‘narrative is thus a global interpretation of changing data measured through sets of relationships’ and points to Todorov’s five stages of causal transformation (see above). Todorov states that ‘change must also emerge on a large scale in the form of a ‘transformation’ among events’ (Branigan 1992, p. 27), that is, that we need to discover a psychological framework within which to place the events as a whole and to determine acceptable probabilities of motivation and outcome. This is a process inevitably informed by our socio-cultural knowledge.

Creating narrative is thus the joint function of reader and text. If the text contributes only part of the story, it follows that determining which texts best provide the reader with a sufficient base to create a story is a case-by-case proposition. Some of those texts might not be ones normally regarded as narrative texts provided they carry the information necessary for the reader.

**Narrative and Lyric Poetry**

A major distinction is commonly made between three main types of poetry; lyric, narrative and dramatic. My concern here is with the first two, where boundaries seem most readily drawn. I began by stating that the narrative function was often denied all except narrative poetry, so what is narrative poetry?

Narrative poetry is a verbal presentation of a sequence of events or facts as in narratio in rhetoric or law) whose disposition in time implies causal connection and point.

Preminger & Brogan 1993, p. 814
This definition from the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* echoes Todorov with its direct implication of a causal relationship. However, the entry also makes a number of other points that, collectively, caution against ready labelling of poetry as one or other mode alone:

- it is difficult to say ‘where epic ends and something else, still narrative poetry, begins’ (p. 815);
- lyric and narrative poetry interpenetrate in Chinese and Japanese poetry especially (p. 815);
- ‘pure types [of narrative] are not likely to keep their purity over any distance, and…, depending on need, comfortably assimilate one another’ (p. 817).

This acknowledges, at least, that narrative poetry may accommodate other modes, including lyric poetry—and, sometimes, vice versa. What then is lyric poetry? Lyric poetry has its ancient antecedents in musical expression:

> …the musical element is intrinsic to the work intellectually as well as aesthetically: it becomes the focal point for the poet’s perceptions…to convey emotional and rational values

Preminger & Brogan 1993, p. 713.

Modern lyric poems are seldom written to be sung, however. Preminger and Brogan comment that there has been ‘a basic failure to define both the precise aspects of the lyric genre which distinguish it from narrative and dramatic poetry and those which justify the inclusion under one term of all the disparate types of poem commonly called ‘lyrical’’ (1993, p. 714). Many defining, non-musical characteristics of lyric poetry have been suggested: ‘brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image’ (Preminger and Brogan p. 715). Exceptions to this complete package are not hard to find. Consequently, musical aspects (cadence, repetition, meter and rhyme, etc.) still figure prominently in defining the lyric mode:

> In its modern meaning, a lyric poem is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet’s sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image.

Preminger & Brogan 1993, p. 715

This statement indicates how difficult it is to reach a satisfactory description of lyric poetry without also seeming too inclusive. Taken together with the rather flexible notion of what constitutes narrative poetry, we can see that the demarcations between categories of poetry are not inviolable or sacred. The most that might be said, then, about whether a narrative function lies in a given poem or not is that we have no sure criterion. So, perhaps narrativity is a more elusive quality than might have been supposed at first. We certainly cannot automatically rule out narrative function in a so-called lyric poem, even some haiku.

The Unity of the Text?

Aristotle devised a set of propositions for creative writing that is still influential today. One of his tenets was that a plot should possess a well-defined beginning, middle and end, rather than starting or finishing at arbitrary points (1981, p. 39). He says, ‘it should be possible to perceive the beginning and the end as a unity’ (1981, p. 59). Turning to haiku, one might
wonder how this would be possible. We do get more of a feel for the presence of narrative in this haiku by Kerouac than from the previous examples:

Two cars passing  
on the freeway  
—Husband and wife  

One obstacle to identifying narrative in this poem is that there is a lot of uncertainty about the context: Aristotle would not be pleased. After all, we do not know why these people are heading in opposite directions. Are they aware of each other as they pass? What happens next? An optimist might say that the power of the poem lies precisely in what is omitted and, as a result, there is great potential in the tension of the unresolved. In any case, the structure of the poem and its start and end are hardly arbitrary, but quite the opposite. As with all haiku, it works best precisely because of the deliberation with which its subject matter has been framed. But is it narrative? Here is another Kerouac haiku, one that is perhaps more testing:

The son packs  
quietly as the  
Mother sleeps  
Kerouac 2003, p. 174

Similar questions arise concerning the detail that would justify interpretation of the events depicted. Why is this happening? Why is the son leaving, and why, especially, when his mother is asleep? If there is a narrative, where are the explicit beginning, middle and end? The situation presented in the poem is ultimately as mysterious as that in the previous poem.

Aristotle favoured action over character, and haiku frequently foreground subjects, setting and actions. So far, okay with Aristotle, though it must be said that more modern debate has swung towards favouring character that is depicted through action as the preferred mode for narrative. Aristotle also argued for the essential nature of unity in a work.

...the plot-structure, as the mimesis of action, should be a representation of a unitary and complete action; and its parts, consisting of the events, should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb or disjoint the work’s wholeness. For anything whose presence or absence has no clear effect cannot be counted an integral part of the whole.

Aristotle 1981, p. 40

Everything must count. This advice about only keeping in a text what is vital to move a story forward has been echoed through the centuries by countless editors. But how much could be removed from a haiku, anyway? One would expect that such a spare form of poetry would not allow further pruning without deleterious effect, but that is not a sufficient condition to qualify all haiku as narratives. On the other hand, short forms of poetry that are not given the nominal status of narrative can perform a narrative function.

Let us compare this with the statements of Boris Tomachevsky, of the Russian Formalist school. Tomachevsky suggests that the key element in narrative is its unification through use
of a theme: ‘a work is unified by a theme which runs through it; the theme makes the work cohere’. This theme is to be found in the plot rather than the story (1965, p. 61). He says that, ‘Plot is distinct from story. Both include the same events, but in the plot the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they are presented in the work’ (1965, p. 67).

Tomachevsky also distinguishes mere description from the particular arrangement of thematic elements and says that a ‘story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another’ (1965, p. 70). Like Aristotle, he discriminates between the constituent elements; specifically, those that could be deleted and those that could not. A coherent plot is marked by the soundness of motivation within its complexes of motifs. Each theme in a long narrative should be present only if justified by the design of the plot.

By simply retelling we discover what may be omitted without destroying the coherence of the narrative and what may not be omitted without disturbing the connections among events. The motifs which cannot be omitted are bound motifs; those which may be omitted without disturbing the whole causal-chronological course of events are free motifs.

Tomachevsky 1965, p. 68

Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that ‘poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions’ (1963, p. 110). One might claim, too, that with such a premium being placed on the words and the structure of poems, each word must count in a haiku like this one, also by Kerouac:

Spring rain,
Kicking stones
An arrowhead

Kerouac 2003, p. 170

We might imagine a context in which the action of this poem neatly fits, one that would meet both Aristotle’s dictum of unity and also the arguments for keeping only what is essential. As it is shown, this is a quite tiny story, and we might generally say that, whatever other detail we could surround it with, it functions as a very minimal work. Nonetheless, there is something straightforward in this haiku. Without too much guesswork we could say that the narrator is out of doors and, while kicking stones during a walk in the spring rain, uncovers an arrowhead. There is time and place, and action that falls neatly into cause and effect. We could imagine some surprise when the arrowhead is found. It is concise but it seems to tell a story. What is the resolution? What happens next? What would you imagine happening, and would imagining be enough for this to count as a narrative? If we accept the claim that the meaning of a text is found in the act of reading, then it might be sufficient for some readers as it stands.
There was only one haiku in the Kerouac collection of 500 or so that contained a wedding reference. It is a picture devoid of movement; more a play on the whiteness of bridal clothing, a simile rather than a narrative:

The falling snow—

The hissing radiators—

The bride out there

Kerouac 2003, p. 163

The degree of narrativity of these very short poems obviously varies. To emphasise the idea that narrative can be found in a non-narrative form of writing, I will turn to two poems by different authors; the first poem being haiku-like in its length and form, and the other a more conventional poem of the ‘lyric’ kind.

In Steve Kelen’s poem, ‘The Wedding’, we have another concise depiction of a scene that has appeared in numerous accounts of wedding receptions. It is haiku-like in structure; certainly comparable in that regard to the Kerouac poems used so far. A poem of only three lines, this attempts to encapsulate all that is important (and stereotypical?) of weddings:

Punch-up in car park

Groom spits teeth, classic wedding

Never forgotten

Kelen 2000, p. 22

Is the final line redundant? It is arguable that this poem could be reduced even further without significant loss of narrative value for a typical reader, so that it reads, ‘Punch-up in car park/Groom spits teeth, classic wedding’. Maybe even ‘classic wedding’ could go. The phrases in question do seem to operate to preclude an alternative (and maybe more brutal) conclusion, so they do perform a useful closing role. The haiku scholar, Harold Stewart, writes that, ‘the haiku poets could assume in their audience a familiarity with the lore and legends, ceremonies and customs, of their common cultural heritage’ (1969, p. 10). Similarly, a reader would bring sufficient knowledge of wedding behaviour to the act of reading the Kelen poem to understand the significance of the car park incident and the probabilities for various, subsequent courses of action. Branigan, who opposes lyric poetry being treated as if it has a narrative function, nonetheless writes:

Here is where a narrative schema becomes important. It helps to direct our search for pertinent causes by proposing a segmentation applicable on many scales of action and ‘filling in’ any connectives that are missing from the surface structure. We discover and justify connections among narrative elements with respect to such schematic functions as goal, reaction, resolution, epilogue and narration.

Branigan 1992, p. 29.

He goes on to add that, ‘These schemas are a way of working through cultural assumptions and values. Thus ‘cause and effects’ emerge, as it were, after the fact as explanatory labels for a sequence of actions...’ (1992, p. 29). We interpret the text provisionally as we proceed, imputing motives and outcomes based on our own cultural stance and knowledge.
I have suggested that narrative can sometimes be constructed from very short poems. I want now to consider Charles Simic's 'The Blizzard of Love', obviously a longer piece than those I have been looking at so far. Simic presents one of his scenarios; a sudden moment that conjures fabulous possibilities. This time it emerges from the particular clothing of three people who meet accidentally in a snowstorm. The poem relies on the associations that would typically be made from the colour and type of clothing. This is the whole poem:

A pastry chef carrying a lit birthday cake
Found himself in a blinding snowstorm.
He met a bride shop saleslady
Modeling one of her feathery dresses.
He met a waiter with a napkin over his arm.

'Why don't you marry the two of us?'
He called after the waiter,
But the heavy flakes hid the blushing bride
And the man in black
Before either one of them had time to reply.

Simic 1999, p. 44

Comparing it to the previous poems, we could say that a narrative is much more evident. The extra 'space' allows greater delineation of character through action and dialogue. There is progression rather than a static picture. Yet, according to earlier definitions, this would normally be regarded as a lyric rather than a narrative poem. I would argue that there is a story here, even if it is skeletal, and even if the text relies more on the reader's enterprise to construct it than longer works would.

Certainly, there can be arguments based around the extent of narrative in a given poem and how much explicit information is required to be provided within the text. Degrees of narrativity are possible, and the test of unity need not be confined to the text of the poem. My contention is that we cannot automatically deny narrative character to even a slight poem, especially where its content and subject matter refer to aspects of cultural practice that are very well-known. These can be linked to a strong narrative framework outside the text that reinforces what is found within it, allowing construction of narrative during reading.

Summary

Tomachevsky says that, 'all comedies end in marriage, and all tragedies in the deaths of the principal characters' (1965, p. 92). In a recent Australian TV soap, Neighbours, the bride was killed in a car crash on the way to her honeymoon. Just before the accident, the newlyweds had to leave their limousine behind when it suffered an electrical fault, so they were travelling instead in a 20-year old Holden. It is axiomatic in Australian TV production that only old and cheap cars can be destroyed, and that all old and cheap cars must be destroyed, so the bride
was clearly doomed. Someone should have told her about that car, or she should have read the script. Was it a comedy, or a tragedy, or just too predictable for either? (see Murphy 2003, p. 24)

Poetry is seldom as obvious, thank goodness, even when it leans on our expectations of customary narrative structure. Rather than granting primacy to any particular school of theoretical thought, I am concerned with the more basic notion that narrative exists in forms of poetry that are not traditionally acknowledged as performing a narrative function. If we find narratives there, we can find them almost anywhere. Barthes acknowledges the power of what we bring to reading when he writes that:

The narrative language...within us comprises from the start these essential headings...any function which initiates a seduction prescribes from the moment it appears, in the name to which it gives rise, the entire process of seduction such as we have learned it from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative.

Barthes 1977, p. 102.

I like this sense of meaning as a beguiling process. Through examining some short poems, I hope to have shown that narrative can be created in the normal partnership between text and reader, and that this is especially true when the subject matter refers to or is situated in the familiar realm of wedding stories. The seduction performed by narrative, as it were, is likely to be at its most powerful when it relies on names and codes that are strongly reinforced by the social order and practices in the world of our own experience. Wedding stories offer just that template and they operate effectively in poetry, whether it is labelled narrative or lyric.

References


