

Narrative Poetry

Like a work of (prose) fiction, a narrative poem tells a story; in other words, it has a plot related by a narrator, though its plot might be based on actual rather than made-up events. Comprised of the same elements discussed in the Fiction section of this book, a narrative poem encourages us to ask the same questions—about character, plot, narration, and so on—that we do when reading a short story or novel. (See “Questions about the Elements of Fiction” in “Fiction: Reading, Responding, Writing.”)

In centuries past, narrative poetry was a—even *the*—dominant subgenre of poetry. As a result, there are many different kinds of narrative poems, including book-length **epics** like Homer’s *Iliad*; chivalric **romances** like Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*; grisly murder **ballads**, often rooted in actual events; and a range of harder-to-classify works of varying lengths such as the relatively short example below.

EDWARD ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

- 5 And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good-morning,” and he glittered when he walked.

- And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
10 And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine,¹ we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

- So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
15 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

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- How does the poem characterize Richard Cory? What is the effect of the first-person plural narration?
- What details in the poem’s first three stanzas might make its final stanza simultaneously surprising, ironic, and predictable?

1. In conclusion, in sum.