

Testing the Cross-Generic Application of Narratology to Poetry Analysis

An Empirical Approach

This paper addresses the possibilities of a cross-generic application of narratology to lyric poetry by contrasting the macro-genres of *narrative fiction* and *lyric poetry* on a high level of abstraction as acts of communication in the medium of writing, distinguished by formal and thematic restrictions. While narrative, defined as a change of state, centrally constitutes a narrative text proper, a lyric poem allows for a wide range of text types, including narrative, in various forms, with a tendency towards condensation and abbreviation. The wide variety of narrative structures used in poems is then documented by examples from the English canon, featuring condensed, hypothetical, remembered, demanded, rejected, dreaded and imagined narratives. The importance of narrative in lyric poems is finally exemplified by groups of consecutive sonnets in Shakespeare's collection, in which a particular narrative structure is systematically varied for greater effect.

1. Theoretical Reflections

This paper addresses the possibilities and limits of a cross-generic application of narratology to the analysis of lyric poetry¹ by starting with a comprehensive description of the two broad literary macro-genres of *narrative fiction* on the one hand and *lyric poetry* on the other, on a high level of abstraction, as two distinct acts of verbal communication in the medium of writing, in the realm of art. These two macro-genres are sharply distinguished by a number of formal and especially of thematic restraints and specifications. This distinction can comprehensively be specified on the basis of the opposition between the *paradigmatic* and the *syntagmatic* axes of a text and more specifically between the act of *enunciation* and the *enounced* text as the result of that enunciative act.² The genre of *narrative fiction*, on the one hand, is centrally determined – on the *syntagmatic* level – by the feature of *narrative* as its basic content, structuring the sequence of the text, the *enounced*. And narrative is a specific text-type, a “semiotic macro-mode” (Wolf 2020, 145),³ which can be defined, by way of minimal definition, as a *significant* temporal *change of state* predicated on a person, a group of persons or a situation (see Schmid 2014, 2–4): *state* refers either to the social and material dimension or to the mental, the cognitive or psychic dimension (see Schmid 2021) or to both combined;⁴ and *significant* presupposes some marked turn, some deviation from the expected, the normal course of things, some kind of *event*.⁵ The genre of *lyric poetry*, on the other hand, is centrally determined, in the *paradigmatic* axis, by the *performance*, the staged pronouncement of an utterance

(“Äußerungsstruktur”),⁶ the *enunciation*, driven by a specific motivation and allowing for a wide range of themes and topics addressed – within the *enounced* – such as reflection, expression, description, imagination, desire, recollection, argumentation, including narrative.⁷ Narrative as drawn on in lyric poems, on the level of the *enounced*, like the other possible themes or text types, can assume a wide variety of shapes, lengths and degrees of explicitness, such as condensed, abbreviated, implied and covert versions – generally with a strong preponderance of *mental* changes. There is a culturally and historically variable reservoir of narrative *schemata*, which a narrative text can draw on, i.e., typical changes of state (such as quest for a goal, love desire for a person, evolution of growing up, process of decay, striving for clarification or insight). The genre-specific (but historically variable) application of *prosodic* devices⁸ in poems, such as metre, rhyme and verbal patterning, mainly functions as a semantic modulation of the thematic content of lyric poems, attributable not to the speaker but to the (abstract) author.

Applying narratological categories to the analysis of lyric poetry⁹ concerns both the *syntagmatic* and the *paradigmatic* relations within the text of the poetic utterance, the *enounced*.¹⁰ With respect to the *paradigmatic* dimension, the act of enunciation and performance, the central defining feature of lyric poetry, the stance of biographical author, abstract (or implied) author and speaker can be distinguished. The stance of the speaker can assume a wide range of textual manifestation, ranging from explicit presence (as indicated by pronouns, self-reference and deictic particles) to maximum covertness. One significant distinction between narrative fiction and lyric poetry concerns the *status* of the primary voice, the ultimate source, the enunciator of the entire utterance – the *narrator* in narrative fiction and the *speaker* in lyric poetry. While the position of the narrator has ultimately to be considered as *relative*, i.e., as position dependent and unavoidably one-sided, and thus might be qualified as unreliable by the abstract author, the speaker in a lyric poem is conventionally posited as *absolute*, as the unquestionable ultimate source of the pronouncement, the enunciation, presenting radical reality. But though this is a basic convention, poems can (and, in fact, intermittently do) present speakers as limited and biased in their view. In the *syntagmatic* dimension of lyric poems there are no restrictions on the selection of text types and on their concatenation and combination.

It is understood that the occurrence of narrative structures in lyric poems does not turn poetry into a narrative genre but it shows that poems pervasively do make use of narrative structures to organise the poetic utterance. The question of the relevance of narrative to lyric poetry – and thus the question of the cross-generic applicability of narratological categories to the analysis of lyric poetry – can only be answered empirically, that is, by testing whether and how frequently narrative structures do in fact occur in lyric poems.

This broad sketch of the distinction between *narrative fiction* and *lyric poetry* will now be followed by a survey of the wide spectrum of forms which narrative structures can take in lyric poems, by citing examples from all periods of English poetry, thereby documenting and analysing how narrative structures do occur in

the form of condensed, hypothetical, recollected, desired, rejected, dreaded or imagined versions. The selected examples are all well-known poems from the literary canon to prove that the use of narrative structures in lyric poetry is not a rare phenomenon occurring only in scattered obscure texts but has to be taken as prototypical for lyric poetry. All these examples (with one exception) present explicit speakers, which is the dominant feature of lyric poetry through all periods. Poems without a conspicuous ‘I’ have speakers too, of course. But they create the impression of displaying an indubitably objective picture of a state of affairs.

2. William Wordsworth: “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” (1807)

I will start with a clear example of narrativity in a lyric poem, as a test case for the prototypical application of narratological categories to the analysis of lyric poetry: William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”¹¹. As to the *syntagmatic* dimension, the *speaker*, as the *enunciator* of the utterance, the enounced, recollects – narrates – a personal experience, in the *past tense* (“wandered” [l. 1]; “had brought” [l. 18]) and finally extends the report into the present (“when on my couch I lie” [ll. 19–24]). On the surface this is a sequence of *bodily* acts – walking and watching in a natural environment, a wooded area with a lake, later resting at home, constituting an extensive *change of state* in the speaker’s subjective, *external* existence. But this bodily change of state is accompanied by – and essentially signifies – a *mental* change of state, with a significant, an *eventful* turn, from loneliness to companionship. This development is clearly motivated by the speaker’s desire to overcome his feeling of loneliness, which is stated at the very beginning: “lonely as a cloud” (l. 1). And accordingly the successive stages in the *mental* development from isolation to companionship are explicitly stated in the sequence of the speaker’s utterance, in the course of the four stanzas: “lonely as a cloud” (l. 1); “company” (ll. 15–16); “my heart [...] / [...] dances with [...]” (l. 24). That this change of state essentially refers to the *mental* dimension is clearly stressed throughout: “I saw” (l. 3), “be gay” (l. 15), “mood” (l. 20), “inward eye” (l. 21), “bliss of solitude” (l. 22), “heart” (l. 23). Thus this poem as a whole is comprehensively devoted to presenting a *narrative* as its central content and aim, an *eventful mental change of state* from the beginning to the end, as an experience beginning in the past and extending into the present and beyond. That the eventful shift from loneliness to companionship (“dance”) is repeatable does not reduce the degree of eventfulness but emphasises the pervasive and definitive status of the change of state. The eventful narrative *schema* underlying this mental change of state can be identified as invigoration or revivification of man by nature – a schema particularly widespread in Romantic poetry.

With respect to the *paradigmatic* dimension, the *speaker* does not hold an absolute, a reliable position in this poem. Rather, he can be observed, behind his

back, as it were, to create, inadvertently, out of his own need (loneliness), the experience which he narrates as something coming to him from the outside. He starts by seeing himself as part of nature (“lonely as a *cloud*” [l. 1; emphasis added]) and then spontaneously and subconsciously interprets nature in human terms: “I saw a *crowd*” (l. 2); “a *host*” (l. 3); “*dancing*” (l. 6; emphases added). But he does not see through these personal projections: “but *little thought*” (l. 16; emphasis added), rather, he experiences his impressions, his mood as something coming to him from the outside (“what wealth the show *to me had brought*” [l. 18; emphasis added]). Thus, Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” is the clear instance of a lyric poem presenting a complete extensive eventful narrative, in the mental dimension, from the perspective of a partly unreliable speaker as its narrator. The narrative schema the poem draws on – re-invigoration of personal existence through close contact with nature – is widely employed in Romantic poetry.

3. Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Ode to the West Wind” (1819)

In Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”¹², the speaker’s utterance as a whole is set – is being *performed*, in the manner of a *performativity fiction* – in a wild natural environment with a wide vista of the Mediterranean (l. 30). The addressee of the entire utterance, explicitly named as the West Wind, clearly stands for nature in general, the dynamic vital and creative force of universal life, both physical and spiritual: “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver” (ll. 13–14), and pervading the whole world, on the surface of the earth (stanza I), in the air, the sky (stanza II) and in the depth of the sea (stanza III). These changes are – at present – destructive (ll. 2, 4, 7, 16, 24, 25, etc). More particularly, nature is evoked here in the form of the dynamic *vegetational cycle*, the process of decline and renewal in the course of a year, of decline in autumn and the eventful renewal in spring. And this vegetational cycle functions as the *narrative schema* Shelley’s ode is based on, presented here in its intermediate phase, the phase of decline (“thou breath of Autumn’s being” [l. 1]; “to their dark wintry bed” [l. 6]), but with a predictive outlook at the coming second phase, the eventful turn, the renewal (“until / Thine azure sister of the Spring” [l. 8f.]).

The speech situation changes in the course of the ode. In the first part (stanzas I–III) the speaker’s stance is impersonal, a ritual invocation of nature as represented by the west wind – in its current state of decline. Subsequently, in the second part (stanzas IV–V), the speaker comes to the fore as a specific *individual*, indicated by the pervasive use of the first-person pronoun (“If I were [...]” [ll. 43–52]) and by the specification of his personal problems, the loss of natural strength, freedom, mobility and (artistic) creativity: “in my sore need” (l. 52). The speaker thus explicitly relates – parallels – his present personal condition of decline to the present stage of the schematic vegetational cycle. He recollects his

former participation in nature's creative, vital force as a boy (ll. 48–51) and his subsequent and still continuing decline and separation from nature: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed! / A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee" (ll. 54–56). Section V then voices the speaker's desire to be re-integrated into nature's dynamic cycle, specifically in his artistic, creative powers, as an artist (a poet): "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is" (l. 57), "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My Spirit. Be thou me, impetuous one!" (ll. 61–62).

Shelley's ode thus presents two narrative sequences – first, nature's vegetational narrative schema as the general frame, from the present state of autumnal decline to the envisaged revivification in next year's spring (l. 70), second, the speaker's personal story of decline and his prayed for, desired artistic re-invigoration, functioning as the eventful turn. So far the poem features the speaker's development towards a creative poet as a narrative yet to be fulfilled.

But when one considers the poetic achievement of this very ode, especially the impressive powerful invocation of the west wind in the first three sections and the speaker's moving lament about his suffering one can say that the poem demonstrates, behind the speaker's back, unbeknown to him, that the prayer has already inadvertently been fulfilled in the artistic constitution of the utterance, the very expression of the desire. Thus Shelley's speaker – like the speaker in Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" – can be shown to speak not from an absolute, unrestricted position, but to possess only a limited, biased perspective of the situation.

4. William Butler Yeats: "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928)

Like in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" the speaker in William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"¹³ reflects on his personal existence as being determined by the narrative schema of the vegetational cycle of growth and decline. However, here the focus is not on decline as the prerequisite for a new growth but on decline as final and terminating the cycle definitively – for humans: "[...] no country for old men" (l. 1). And the speaker's radical reaction is to opt out of this cycle altogether: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing" (ll. 25–26).

The poem sets in, in its first stanza, with a comprehensive view of summer, as the height of the vegetational cycle, with a summary description of the natural world as dominated, organised by the narrative schema of growth and decline, paradoxically condensed in the formula "those dying generations" (l. 3) and summed up in "Whatever is begotten, born and dies" (l. 6). This schema is rejected by the speaker because he finds *himself* at the very end of this progressive cycle, in the final state of decline – old age ("That is no country for old men" [l. 1]; "An aged man is but a paltry thing" [l. 9]) – but he desires the continuation of his existence in a different mode, as part of a different schema. For this reason he then opposes the state of the natural world by a state not subject to change,

an existence without a narrative history: “Monuments of unageing intellect” (l. 8), namely works of *art*, objects created by human spiritual ingenuity and thus resistant to natural decay. What the speaker’s utterance then goes on to envisage and to bring about is the ritual transformation of himself as a human being, a natural and therefore changeable body into a timeless, eternal work of art: “Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make ...” (ll. 25–27). That is: he imagines himself in future as liberated from being subject to natural – temporal – change. This is the exact opposite movement to the Romantic desire (in Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s poems) of full integration into the dynamic natural world and development. What Yeats’s poem in its central progression then (in the second and third stanzas) pursues and enacts (‘narrates’) is the speaker’s *ritual transformation* into a work of art, imagined as an ongoing learning and purification process: “singing school”; “studying monuments of its [i.e. the soul’s] magnificence” (ll. 13–14) and “Come from the holy fire [...] be the singing-masters of my soul. / Consume my heart away” (ll. 19–21) and “gather me / Into the artifice of eternity” (ll. 23–24). This narrative transformation is finally, in the closing stanza, imagined as having already been realised – the *eventful* conclusion of the transformation process, the artistic creation narrative: “set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium” (ll. 30–31). This description implies that the speaker has finally – in his vivid, creative imagination – achieved this transformation and is now actually “singing,” in this very poem, to us, the readers. In other words: the desired shift from the natural schema – as determining his existence – to the new, the artistic, narrative schema has been completed.

Like Wordsworth and Shelley in their poems Yeats reveals his speaker as limited in his view: the imagination of being transformed into a *bird* – if a mechanical one – betrays his lasting desire for the natural world and that he can imagine his transformed artistic existence only in the shape of a *natural* thing, after all. And furthermore this transformation is only possible as an “*artifice of eternity*,” as a trick, as it were – as an act of imagination.

5. John Donne: Divine Meditation 14, “Batter My Heart” (1633)

In Donne’s sonnet “Batter My Heart”¹⁴, the speaker is driven by an ardent desire to be divested of the inherent natural resistance he as a human creature is prone to and to subject himself whole-heartedly to God’s power – “batter my heart” (l. 1) and thus be changed into something completely different, completely “new” (l. 4). This desired renewal is projected in the form of three different but parallel *narrative schemata*, each in one quatrain – first, the experience of a person who is physically attacked, knocked down, utterly destroyed and then transformed into something new: “bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new” (ll. 1–4; here ll. 3f.), second, the experience of an occupied town which

is attacked by its rightful ruler but is so far prevented from admitting him by the present ruler (“your viceroy” [l. 7]): “I, like an usurp’d town to another due, / Labor to admit you” (ll. 5–8; here l. 5) and, third, the experience of an unhappily married woman being raped by her true lover: “Divorce me, untie or break that knot again, / Take me to you, imprison me” (ll. 9–12; here ll. 11f). The last two narratives are finally repeated in the closing couplet (13–14) in a condensed form, bringing out the paradoxical, self-contradictory aim of the desired dynamic *change of state*, the *event*: freedom as the result of enslavement: “[...] for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free” (ll. 12–13) and chastity as the result of rape: “nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (l. 14). Narrative sequences are employed here not as eventful changes of state presently happening or having happened or about to happen in future (as in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Yeats), but, unusually and paradoxically, as eventful changes peremptorily *demanding to be brought about*, to be enacted.

As in the previous poems the speaker does not present an absolute, objective position, but is revealed and can be observed to entangle himself inadvertently in self-contradiction: he prays to God for his own forceful subjugation but the tone of his prayer is overbearing and presumptuous and blatantly contradicts what he demands.

6. Matthew Arnold: “Dover Beach” (1867)

Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”¹⁵ is set in a graphic scene, a moon-lit night on the coast near Dover, in which the speaker addresses the description of a movement of the waves on the beach to his beloved with the aim of inducing her to mutual love. The utterance consists in a general reflection on the outward reality as undergoing continuous *changes of state*, visually represented by the permanent alternation of the ebb and flow of the waves on the beach: “the grating roar, / Of pebbles which the waves suck back, And fling, / At their return, up the high strand” (ll. 9–11) and metaphorically signifying the development of the human condition: “Begin, and cease, and then again begin, / With tremulous cadence slow, and bring / The eternal note of sadness in” (ll. 12–14). Via a reference to Sophocles this observation is then declared to characterise the universal experience of human reality in the past as in the present: “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (ll. 17–18). Although the continuous alternation of rise and fall might be perceived as constantly alternating and thus ultimately cyclical, the emphasis both by the speaker and by Sophocles, is exclusively laid on the *second* half, the section of *decline*: “*cadence*” (l. 13), “the eternal note of *sadness*” (l. 14) and “human *misery*” (l. 18). This one-sided emphasis on *decline* is then used by the speaker to describe the *dominant drift* of the narrative schema of human history – as the growing decline of (religious) faith and thus the progressive erosion of stabilising meaning, as increasing desolation and nihilism – confronting mankind now directly with “the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the

world” (ll. 27–28). The confrontation with desolate reality, to which the development of history has led, is finally – graphically – described by another image of threatening chaos, “a darkling plain [...] / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (l. 36). The speaker is thus seen to develop a specific *historical narrative*, the history of continuous decline, in order to clarify the present intellectual condition and use this insight to offer personal love as a counterforce: “Ah, love, let us be true / to one another!” (ll. 29–30). Mutual love is thus proposed as an *eventful* turning point in the downward drift of human existence, at least in the speaker’s and his beloved’s personal lives.

Here, too, the speaker is revealed as partly biased in his perception: The deduction of a historical narrative of continuous decline from the observation of the regular alternation of ebb and flow is basically incorrect, one-sided and biased – betraying a pre-conceived judgement.

7. Andrew Marvell: “To His Coy Mistress” (1681)

The speaker, in his address to his “coy mistress”¹⁶, draws on the conventional narrative schema of the love story, specifically a male lover’s desire for his mistress, aiming at the eventful consummation of his love with her as his desired and envisaged goal. This narrative schema – a man’s emerging desire for a woman aiming at the consummation as the eventful goal – informs and structures the majority of medieval and renaissance love poems, possibly of love poetry in general. The resistance to consummation in Marvell’s poem, psychologically manifest in the beloved’s coyness, is enforced by conventional morality (the strict norm of sexual abstinence). In the course of Marvell’s poem the speaker addresses his beloved (“lady” [ll. 2, 19]) and argues with her in the rhetorical manner of a traditional *sylogism* to persuade her to grant him the consummation of his love. And he does so by drawing – for his arguments – on the schematic love narrative in altogether three degrees of practical realisation, under three different contextual conditions. The first version (ll. 1–20) is defined by the absence of time and space (“Had we but world enough and time” [l. 1]): Under these ideal conditions the lady’s coyness, i.e. the *temporal* postponement of their consummation and their *spatial* separation from each other, would be no severe problem (“no crime” [l. 2]), because only temporary – they could always happily look forward to their eventual spatial meeting and the eventual temporal fulfilment of their love. By contrast, the second version of the love narrative (ll. 21–32) is determined by realistic conditions of time and transitoriness – here coyness would mean the rigorous and definitive denial of consummation and its replacement by death: “The grave’s a fine and private place / But none, I think, do there embrace” (ll. 31–32). As the logical result of the opposition of these two unsatisfactory versions of the love story schema, both without fulfilment: indefinite postponement and definitive denial, the speaker then finally – in a third, *satisfactory* version of the schema (ll. 33–46) – invites his beloved to rush together with

him to the eventual – eventful – consummation of their mutual love: “Now let us [...] tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life” (ll. 37, 43–44). The speaker thus contrasts two hypothetical unsatisfactory love narrative schemata (lacking conclusive narrative progression) to propose and project a third – a satisfactory, realistic one: eventful conclusion, both temporally and spatially. As in Arnold’s “Dover Beach” the eventful conclusion is envisaged but not yet realised. As against the other poems, Marvell’s speaker’s perspective does not reveal any blind spots.

8. Simon Armitage: “The Unaccompanied” (2017)

In this poem¹⁷ a covert speaker follows, in the present tense, an unnamed solitary (“unaccompanied”) walker’s physical movement through a riverside landscape and his accompanying reflections. Both the physical progression and the mental activity of reflecting and recollecting are presented in the form of narrative sequences, of parallel ongoing actions, an external, physical and an internal, mental one. The *external* sequence is the man’s continuous walk back home, along a river, above a cliff, and finally across a bridge: “Wandering slowly back after dark [...] / above a river, toward a suspension bridge” (ll. 1–2). The *internal, mental* sequence “concerns” (ll. 3, 5, 16) a string of emerging, imagined noises, *voices*, of songs sung by choirs of men, of his father and forefathers, regressively reaching farther and farther back into the past, connecting him mentally with his past, his personal historical origin, the working class background of his family. Both narrative sequences lead *across a separating gap* (the gorge and the temporal distance of the past, respectively) to his ‘home’: “arc[ing] through charged air and spanning the gorge / He steps over the cliff edge and walks across” (ll. 17–18). The narrative sequences of the walk and of the imaginative recollections thus lead the lonely protagonist both forward to his home and backward to his origin, overcoming his loneliness and isolation – both movements reach an eventful goal.

As against most of the other examples, in which the speaker is subsequently revealed to be unaware of certain aspects of his point of view, Armitage’s covert speaker does not seem to have blind spots, arguably because of his withdrawn, uncommitted position – merely registering the physical and mental movements of his figure. The title offers a somewhat different – a distanced – perspective: both literal (the wanderer is indeed unaccompanied) and ironic (ultimately, he is after all accompanied by his ancestors).

9. William Shakespeare: The Sonnets (1609)

By way of concluding my argument for tracing narrative elements in lyric poetry and demonstrating the large variety of modes of employing narrativity in lyric

poems I will finally refer to certain groups of sonnets in Shakespeare's collection of 1609 (nos. 1 to 18, 126, and 29 and 30, 97 and 98), in which the author (as it were behind the speaker's back), can be seen to try out successive variations of one particular *narrative schema* – apparently in order the better to convey a specific meaning.

The particular narrative schema underlying sonnets 1 to 18 and also 126 consists in the preservation and continuation of (human) beauty through time, under the conditions of universal transitoriness and decline, more particularly in the preservation of a man's physical beauty through the event of procreating an equally beautiful child. With reference to this narrative strategy the initial series of the collection are commonly called the *procreation sonnets*.

Sonnet 1¹⁸ initially defines the narrative schema of the procreation plot and proclaims it as universally desired: "From fairest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty's rose might never die, / But as the ripener should by time decease, / His tender heir might bear his memory" (ll. 1–4). Throughout these sonnets this narrative schema, conditioned by the destructive force of *temporality*, is applied by the speaker to the addressee, a beautiful young man. Since an individual's beauty will by nature unavoidably decrease with time, the addressee is urged to preserve and thus continue his beauty by fathering *a child*: "his tender heir" (l. 4) and thereby complete the narrative schema through an eventful turn – trans-individually, as it were. But since the young man so far has refused to engender a child, the speaker reprimands him for his resistance and tries to induce him to give it up: "Pity the world, or else this glutton be, / To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee" (ll. 13–14). In his eager appeal to the addressee the speaker is apparently motivated by the general interest in preserving beauty in a world dominated by time and transitoriness – arguing on behalf of the general public and the inherent value of beauty. The preservation of beauty through the procreation of a child acquires a high degree of *eventfulness* on account both of its high *value* and because it constitutes an unexpected *deviation* from the normal course of things, the unavoidable decay.

The persuasive technique connected with the same narrative schema is repeatedly being varied in the ensuing 16 sonnets. In Sonnet 2¹⁹, for instance, the argument to induce the young man to produce a child consists in an appeal to his pride, as a form of heightened self-affirmation, thus attempting to arouse in him a strong personal *motivation* for procreation. The speaker tries to induce the addressee to engender a child by predicting his future pride in having in fact done so: "How much more praise deserv'd thy beauty's use, / If thou should'st answer 'This fair child of mine / Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse' / Proving his beauty by succession thine!" (ll. 9–12). Having fathered a child would then constitute the completion of the schematic narrative: "This were to be new made when thou art old" (l. 13).

In Sonnet 3²⁰ the same aim is repeated: "Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another" (ll. 1–2), supported by a new argument, reversing the direction of focus: the young man does himself preserve and continue his mother's beauty: "Thou art thy mother's glass,

and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime” (ll. 9–10). He himself is in fact an example of what he is being induced to do. In addition, this argument is supported by the threat of what will happen if he does not act accordingly: “Die single, and thine image dies with thee” (l. 14).

In the subsequent procreation sonnets this schematic narrative is run through, as it were, in a series of secondary, superficial variations until, in Sonnet 17²¹, the speaker introduces a fresh element, a new argument: the reference to his own role as a *poet*. If the addressee were *not* to beget a child as a replica of his own beauty, the future public would not believe the speaker’s praise of this beauty in these very poems and depreciate the quality of his verse: “Who will believe my verse in time to come . . .?” (l. 1) and call him a liar: “This poet lies” (l. 7). Thus, one more argument, now a personal and artistic one, is adduced to make the young man beget a child and conclude the schematic narrative: “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice – in it, and in my rhyme.” (ll. 13–14)

The very next poem, Sonnet 18²², then offers a significantly different completion of the same narrative schema, the preservation and continuation of the young man’s beauty: “Thy eternal summer shall not fade / Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st” (ll. 9–10). The predicate “ow’st” is ambiguous – meaning both “possess” and “owe as a debt” implying that the friend does not possess his beauty at all and therefore is powerless to keep it on account of the general transitoriness but it is only the speaker as a poet who effectually does preserve it in his poetry, in this very poem, “in eternal lines” (l. 12): “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (ll. 13–14). This new and surprising shift from physical to artistic beauty raises the degree of eventfulness. In addition, the shift in the variation and finally changed completion of the narrative schema serves as a move in the changing relationship between the speaker, as adoring lover and friend, and the young man, as the admired and praised beloved. This move shifts the power balance between speaker and addressee: Did he first start from the inferior position of a suppliant, he now implicitly claims the superior, dominant role as someone on whom the addressee is vitally dependent for the preservation of his beauty.

In this sonnet, other than in the previous 17 procreation sonnets, the speaker’s perspective can for the first time be revealed as duplicitous: Rather than unselfishly praising the friend’s enduring beauty he reminds him of his transitoriness and dependence on him as an artist, a sign of the tense personal relationship between them.

In Sonnet 126²³ this same narrative schema is again – a last time – taken up and definitively concluded in this very last poem of the young-man’s section of the collection. This poem starts by addressing the friend as the owner of his timeless beauty: “O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power / Dost hold Time’s fickle glass, his sickle hour; / Who hast by waning grown” (ll. 1–3) – this state would in fact constitute the completion and permanent continuation of the narrative schema as desired in *sonnet 1*: “From fairest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty’s rose might never die” (ll. 1–2). It would make the

engendering of a child, as compensation for the young man's declining beauty in old age unnecessary – since he has not changed, after all – at least so far. But the speaker then terminates, curtails the continuous progression of beauty by stating its unavoidable eventual decline: “[Nature] may detain, but *not still keep*, her treasure: / Her audit, though delay'd, answer'd must be, / And her quietus is to render thee” (ll. 10–12) – a termination, the breaking off of the narrative schema described metaphorically in terms of a financial transaction (the necessity of paying back a debt). Here now the *decline* of beauty – and not its *preservation* as in the precreation sonnets – constitutes the event. Thus the definition of eventfulness is reversed, too.

The procreation sonnets are not the only examples of a deliberate – a strategic – variation of an identical narrative schema in Shakespeare's sonnets. Other examples occur in Sonnets 29 and 30, 97 and 98 and 135 and 136. I will close my discussion of examples from the history of English poetry by a brief look at Sonnets 29²⁴ and 30²⁵. Both poems present structurally the same narrative sequence in the *mental* dimension, syntactically already signalled by starting with the conjunction “when”²⁶: A *chain of complaints* about the speaker's desolate, exposed and rejected personal situation, which is abruptly remedied and reversed by the sudden recollection of the friend's love, a chain of losses followed by eventual compensation and retrieval: In Sonnet 29: “Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, / Haply I think on thee, and then my state [...] sings hymns at heaven's gate” (ll. 9–12), and schematically very similar in Sonnet 30: “The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan, / Which I new pay as if not paid before. / But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end” (11–14). Although the narrative completions of the sequences are *structurally* similar and parallel, there is a difference in *poetic elaboration*. In sonnet 29 the completion is more detailed and emotionally more impressive: in the comparison with a lark rising and warbling as well as the comparison with kings (“I scorn to change my state with kings” [l. 4]). In Sonnet 30 the stating of the reversal is brief and merely matter of fact: “All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end” (l. 14). Although the narrative schema in both poems is structurally similar, the poetic realisation is blatantly different – highlighting the fact that here a variation of the same is attempted – bringing out, possibly, the problem of artistic creation. In both poems, particularly clearly in Sonnet 29, the turn in the mental narrative, may be an appeal to the friend addressed to renew or continue his friendship. Again, the position and the perspective of the speaker is not ‘absolute’ (as a general statement about the world) but ‘relative,’ biased, i.e. surreptitiously implying a personal motive.

10. Conclusion

It was the aim of the preceding overview to test and demonstrate the claim that narrative schemata, in various forms and in various degrees of condensation or

abbreviation, mostly in the mental dimension, are employed in lyric poems to organise the *syntagmatic* level, the *sequence of the enounced, of the utterance*. Poems do not normally *narrate* stories in the strict sense of the term (although this may occur, too, as for instance Wordsworth's poem shows) but they do pervasively rely on the sequential extension of significant *changes of state*, predominantly in the mental dimension.

The second aspect of the application of narratological concepts to the analysis of lyric poems concerns the *paradigmatic* level, namely the stance of the *originator*, *the enunciator* of the utterance, the speaker's voice and perspective. Although the utterance originates from the voice of the speaker, his (or her) perspective is not absolute but *relative*, i.e., it is unavoidably *position based* and is to various degrees one-sided, biased, betraying blind spots or hidden, unacknowledged motives, comparable to the unreliability of narrators in narrative fiction – in the last instance, of course, set up by the author, the empirical or the abstract author.

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How to cite this article:

Hühn, Peter: "Testing the Cross-Generic Application of Narratology to Poetry Analysis. An Empirical Approach." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 15.1 (2026). 53–67.

DOI: [10.25926/p988-1q09](https://doi.org/10.25926/p988-1q09)

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20261008-105720-1](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20261008-105720-1)

URL: <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/diegesis/de/article/download/1790/3024/5997>



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¹ For a recent comprehensive and differentiated discussion of the relation of lyric poetry and narrativity, see Wolf 2020.

² Terms introduced, as *énoncé* and *énonciation*, by Benveniste (1966) and applied, as ‘the enounced’ and ‘enunciation,’ to the analysis of poetry by Easthope (1983).

³ Narration is a fundamental, anthropologically universal operation of dealing with temporality, the phenomenon of time, as the basic condition of human existence.

⁴ In Jakobson’s (1960) terms: the *referential* and the *emotive or expressive* functions of the utterance.

⁵ See Hühn (2014, 159–178) and Schmid (2014, 15–19). Eventfulness is a degradable condition, i.e., the degree, the significance of the change can be higher or lower. The term *eventfulness* can also be applied to cases of lower significance. The deviation from the expected can take various forms, e.g., the paradoxical case that continuation is eventful when change is the usual, e.g., preservation in a world of continuous decay.

⁶ See Hempfer’s (2014) concept of “Performativitätsfiktion” – performativity fiction – presupposing, in its extreme form, the simultaneity of the situations of speaking and of being spoken about (30–45, 68–69).

⁷ See the comprehensive abstract definition of the enunciatory act underlying lyric poems by Brogan (1993, 938).

⁸ Frequently – and traditionally – understood to be central for the definition of lyric poetry. But prosodic features have to be considered as a secondary and historically variable feature, dependent on style, programme, fashion, period, culture. And in certain periods and cultures prosodic devices were equally applied to other genres such as epic, drama and even essays and treatises.

⁹ See Hühn / Sommer 2014, 418–427.

¹⁰ The application of narratological categories to the analysis of lyric poetry has intermittently been contested and rejected especially in the following respects: the relevance of narrative for the sequentiality of poems, the constitution of narrative in the mental, psychic (emotive) and not only the corporeal-social (referential) dimension, the acceptance of eventfulness also in reduced degrees of change, the stance of the speaker as absolute and the emphasis on the prosodic structuring, what Culler calls “the ritualistic element” (Culler 2015, 37; see also Culler 2018; Phelan 1989; 1996; 2007; and Wolf 2020).

¹¹ Ricks 1999, 354–355. The poem can be read via the following link: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud> (date of access: 12/08/2026).

¹² Keegan 2000, 642–644. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45134/ode-to-the-west-wind> (date of access: 12/08/2026).

¹³ Keegan 2000, 892–893. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43291/sailing-to-byzantium> (date of access: 12/08/2026).

¹⁴ Keegan 2000, 232. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44106/holy-sonnets-batter-my-heart-three-persond-god> (date of access: 12/08/2026).

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- ¹⁵ Ricks 1999, 762–763. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ¹⁶ Ricks 1999, 186–187. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44688/to-his-coy-mistress> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ¹⁷ Armitage 2017, 74. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/149876/the-unaccompanied> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ¹⁸ Duncan-Jones 1997, 113. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50643/sonnet-1-from-fairest-creatures-we-desire-increase> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ¹⁹ Duncan-Jones 1997, 115. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50423/sonnet-2-when-forty-winters-shall-besiege-thy-brow> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²⁰ Duncan-Jones 1997, 117. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50644/sonnet-3-look-in-thy-glass-and-tell-the-face-thou-viewest> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²¹ Duncan-Jones 1997, 17. See also <https://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/sonnet.XVII.html> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²² Duncan-Jones 1997, 147. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summer's-day> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²³ Duncan-Jones 1997, 365. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50649/sonnet-126-o-thou-my-lovely-boy-who-in-thy-powr> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²⁴ Duncan-Jones 1997, 169. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45090/sonnet-29-when-in-disgrace-with-fortune-and-mens-eyes> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²⁵ Duncan-Jones 1997, 171. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45091/sonnet-30-when-to-the-sessions-of-sweet-silent-thought> (date of access: 12/08/2026).
- ²⁶ The conjunction *when* as the initial word clearly signalling the *temporal, narrative* organisation of the poetic text occurs frequently in Shakespeare's Sonnets: 2, 12, 15, 29, 30, 43, 64, 88, 106, 138, indicating the frequency of the recourse to narrative schemata in Shakespeare's collection.