

# Poetry Lesson Plans: Storytelling

**Grades:** 11,12 > College Level

**Objective** — The student will:

- explore, as a basis for their poem, their own personal observations and understandings of a specific (real) person's character which might include exploits, action(s), mannerisms and personality
- successfully present these interpretations by writing a poem in "brief" poetical format that "tells a story" about the observed person. **The "character" should NOT be one's own self!**)
- become more attentive to particular human quirks and personalities
- demonstrate the ability to utilize specific words and short phrases in place of long descriptive sentences and paragraphs in presenting a story.

**Hint:** This poem might be described as a "snapshot" of words that quickly, yet effectively tells a "story" about a single, select character. Perhaps the story focuses on an event or the cumulative results of a personality trait related to the character's life. Good subjects could include: a grandparent or other relative or, a peculiar neighbor or acquaintance.

## Storytelling

**Write a poem which satisfies the following criteria:**

1. The poem is in the past tense.
2. The poem is no more than thirty lines in length
3. The poem is in the third person, about somebody (a protagonist) **"other" than yourself**, somebody colorful and vivid enough to make for interesting reading. The protagonist should be nonfictional (You might select one of the more eccentric people you remember from high school) unless you can, as Louis Simpson does in the poem "Caviar At the Funeral," create a convincing fictional character.
4. The poem should not be end-rhymed.
5. The title of the poem should be the name of the protagonist.
6. The main body of the poem should present a scene (as in a movie) dramatizing a telling incident in the life of the protagonist. The scene might well center around some kind of initiation experience, certainly around some experience from which the protagonist learned something important about himself/herself, about the people around him/her or about both. (Experiences which resulted in disillusionment are often particularly suitable for such ultra-short stories.) .
7. The background of the main character or characters should be sketched in by means of digressions.
8. The scene should show the protagonist faced with a situation in which he/she must make a decision.
9. From the decision which the protagonist makes, the reader should gain some insight into the protagonist.
10. From the way in which the author presents the scene, the reader should get a sense of the author's judgment of the character.
11. This judgment should be very tactfully suggested, by innuendo, through hints and through the author's tone of voice, not blatantly stated.
12. Though told with, great economy, the story should contain enough physical details and images to enable the reader to vividly picture the story's central scene.

## **EXAMPLE 1**

### ***Reuben Bright***

Because he was a butcher and thereby  
Did earn an honest living (and did right)  
I would not have you think that Reuben Bright  
Was any more a brute than you or I;  
For when they told him that his wife must die,  
He stared at them and shook with grief and fright,  
And cried like a great baby half that night,  
And made the women cry to see him cry.

And after she was dead, and he had paid  
The singers and the sexton and the rest,  
He packed a lot of things that she had made  
Most mournfully away in an old chest  
Of hers, and put some chopped -up cedar boughs  
In with them, and tore down the slaughter-house.

**-- Edwin Arlington Robinson**

#### **Some questions to consider:**

1. Remembering that the setting of this poem is around 1900, in America, how do you suppose that Reuben Bright's wife died? Should we know more?
  2. What kind of personality did Reuben Bright have? What do you imagine he looked like? Are there any cues in the poem to suggest his physiognomy?
  3. Why, in the beginning, are four whole lines devoted to an apology that Reuben Bright was a butcher?
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## EXAMPLE 2

### ***Caviar at the Funeral***

This was the village, the one where the deacon ate all the caviar at the funeral.  
--Chekhov, "In the Ravine."

On the way back from the cemetery  
they discussed the funeral arrangements,  
and the sermon, "such a comfort to the  
family."

They crowded into the parlor.  
It was hot, and voices were beginning to rise.  
The deacon found himself beside a plate  
heaped with caviar. He helped himself  
to a spoonful. Then another.

Suddenly he became aware  
that everyone's eyes were upon him,  
ruin staring him in the face.  
He turned pale. Then tried to carry it off—  
one may as well be hanged for a sheep  
as a lamb, et cetera.

Meeting their eyes with a stern expression  
he took another spoonful,  
and another. He finished the plate.

Next morning he was seen at the station  
buying a ticket for Kurovskoye,  
a village much like ours, only smaller.

***--Louis Simpson***

#### **Some questions to consider:**

1. What is the author's opinion of the deacon?
2. At what point in the poem does the author stop "showing" and we hear the author's story-telling voice?