

Exploring and Testing the Limits of Cross-Generic Narratology

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This paper addresses the possibilities and limits of the cross-generic application of narratology to lyric poetry on the basis of a comprehensive description of the two broad genres of narrative fiction and lyric poetry on a high level of abstraction as acts of verbal communication in the medium of writing, which are distinguished by a number of formal and especially thematic restraints and specifications. While the structure of narrative, as the basic content of narrative fiction, is defined as a significant change of state predicated on a person, a group of persons or a situation, lyric poetry allows for a wide range of themes and topics, also in combination, including – inter alia – narrative sequences, which can assume a variety of shapes, lengths, degrees of explicitness including condensed, abbreviated and covert types – generally with a strong preponderance of mental changes. The genre-specific (and historically variable) application of prosodic devices functions as a semantic modulation of the thematic content of lyric poems. This broad overview of the distinction of narrative fiction and lyric poetry is subsequently substantiated in two successive lines of argumentation and documentation with respect to the use of narrative elements in lyric poems. First, the wide spectrum of different forms narrative structures can take on in lyric poems will succinctly be substantiated by naming examples from all periods of English poetry, from the 17th century to the present, documenting and analysing how narrative structures do pervasively occur in the form of condensed, hypothetical, recollected, desired, rejected, dreaded or imagined versions. 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 do make use of narrative structures to organise the poetic utterance. Second, the application of narrative elements in lyric poems is finally explored by a close look at specific groups of sonnets from Shakespeare's collection (nos. 1 to 18, 29 and 30, 97 and 98), in which the speaker can be seen to try out successive variations of one particular narrative schema the better to convey a specific meaning – thereby demonstrating the significance of narrative elements in lyric poetry and the use made of narrative in the construction of the poem.