

INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE STAGE

Narration fits classical Christian education. At the heart of classical education is the belief expressed by Aristotle that we learn best by imitation. Written narration, like oral narration, is an imitation of the matter under study. When we narrate orally we “tell” back the information verbally. That information may be a chapter in a book being read, a parable, a fable, an essay, or even a single verse in the Bible. In the same way, when we do a written narration of a passage we “tell” back the information in writing. In both cases we imitate the original author’s thoughts with possible amplification or reduction.

Narration imitates the ideas in the passage—words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. The student must comprehend the meaning of a particular piece of writing, identify the key words or phrases, outline the ideas and then demonstrate his comprehension by rewriting these ideas using his own words in his own composition. Those ideas include not only the terms and thoughts but also the structure and style of the argument or story. Identifying key words and phrases and being able to outline the ideas in the piece are tools to, first, thoroughly understand the meaning of the author, and then, to assist in rewriting the piece in one’s own words and phrases. The student learns to reason and gains one of the “tools of learning,” which is effective written communication through narration.

Narration insures that the student’s writing is driven by ideas rather than vocabulary or style. Focusing on ideas is the foundation for good writing. We use narration to insure our students become good writers and to give them the opportunity to become excellent writers. Good writing is the clear and logical expression of ideas through language. Excellent writing is the clear and logical expression of ideas through brilliant and powerful images. If writing is not clear and logical it cannot be excellent. In fact, writing which is not clear and logical is poor writing. Good writing need not be composed of profound vocabulary or

elegant style—those brilliant and powerful images just mentioned. The adroit use of vocabulary and style may mean the difference between a good piece of writing and an excellent piece, but without clear logical thought no amount of cleverness will transform poor writing into good writing. And so we imitate excellent writing through narration, which allows the great authors to become our composition instructors.

This process of imitation through narration differs profoundly from other curricula. The divergence is not a modern phenomenon. Dorothy Sayers identified the absence of imitation as a serious lack fifty years ago. John Milton in his essay “On Education” written in the seventeenth century vigorously complains of the “original” compositions which many schools required grammar students to write. To paraphrase gently, Milton called them premature. At bottom the issue is a theological one and has to do with the nature of man. Sinful man seeks autonomy—from God, from neighbor, from the past. Autonomous man believes he is superior to the primitive, ancient cultures, which came before his time. Of course, his time, no matter what century, is always considered progressive, innovative and modern. The whole idea of imitation is abhorrent to autonomous man. He desires to be independent from the past—not dependent and connected to it. Consequently, as this worldview enters into the educational arena, independent or autonomous thinking is encouraged by asking students to express their opinions and feelings as if these personal expressions are the basis for learning, reasoning and truth. However, true reasoning and learning are based not on expressing one’s own opinion and thoughts but on the ability to understand the opinions and thoughts of others and to discern whatever truth exists in those other thoughts and opinions. In a more profound way, our ability to “discover” any truth is simply the ability to understand God’s opinions and thoughts.

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The Rose

Read the Narrative aloud.

Whoever admires the rose for its beauty should consider what befell Aphrodite. The goddess was in love with Adonis; Ares was in love with her: the goddess was to Adonis what Ares was to Aphrodite. God was in love with goddess; goddess was in pursuit of mortal. The longing was the same, though the kind differed. But out of jealousy Ares wanted to kill Adonis, thinking that Adonis' death would put an end to love. So Ares struck Adonis. The goddess, learning of what was done, hurried to his defense; and in her haste she ran into a rosebush and caught herself on its thorns. The flat of her foot was pierced, and the blood, which flowed from the wound, changed the color of the rose to its own appearance. And the rose that at first was white came to be what we see today.

Nine Components of Narrative Invention

Identify the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why* of the narrative. Give examples of Recognition, Reversal, and Suffering.

1. *Recognition _____
2. Reversal _____
3. Suffering _____
4. Agents _____
5. Action _____
6. Time _____
7. Place _____
8. Manner _____
9. Cause _____

* Refers to the first definition of recognition unless otherwise noted. Examples of the second definition will be preceded by (2).

Outline

Summarize the Narrative by completing the outline.

I. _____
A. _____
B. _____
C. _____
D. _____

II. _____
A. _____
B. _____

III. _____
A. _____
B. _____
C. _____
D. _____

Variations: Part I

Give two synonyms for the bold words in each sentence. Then vary the sentence in three ways.

1. "Ares **wanted** to **kill** Adonis to **gain love**."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2. "The **goddess** in **haste** **hurried** to his **defense**."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

