

**WEDDING THE POEM AND ITS READER:
THE FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE
IN CONTEMPORARY LYRIC POETRY**

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Steve Evans

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Published Poems and Prizes

Published poems in this thesis:

- ‘Crow on the Cross’ was published in *Unruly Sun* (2007)
- ‘Dachau’ appeared in *The New England Review*, No. 18 (2003)
- ‘Wedding Present’ was in *Fluorescent Voices* (1997)

Prizes:

- ‘Dachau’ won the 2003 New England Poetry Prize
- Draft poems from *The Floating Bride* were the basis for being awarded the 2008 Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship (\$15,000) in the 2008 Adelaide Festival of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The use of language involves patterning within a network of word meanings. Thus, at least a basic form of narrative function is intrinsic to our speaking, our writing, and our reading whenever we wish to move utterance beyond mere noise. Yet theorists and creative writers, including poets, disagree when it comes to lyric poetry, often regarding the narrative function there as alien, trivial, inactive, or simply too difficult to deal with. This is most unusual, especially given that the lyric poem, too, is inextricably bound up with the reader's sense-making that depends to a large extent on their normal use of language. Why this odd denial of narrative agency in such poetry? Is it really so foreign to the lyric poem?

To demonstrate that there actually is a narrative element at work in lyric poetry, I have focussed on the way that such poetry refers to the constituent events and characters of weddings. This engages the reader with a set of well-known social and cultural practices comprising the trace of the archetypal wedding story, from courtship through to honeymoon, and various stops between. A stock of wedding motifs (such as bride, groom, ring, proposal, exchange of vows, etc.) readily links to other parts of that story, enabling short forms of writing to convey a great deal of information with only brief and sometimes indirect references. This is possible since the reader makes the expected connection to the larger narrative template.

My thesis demonstrates, with particular reference to contemporary lyric poems (those published since 1950), that a narrative process does underpin lyric poetry. I begin by discussing my motivation for undertaking this project, next considering the development of the epithalamium (the traditional wedding poem), and then focussing on the nature of the lyric poem and of narrative. In subsequent chapters, I apply my findings to a variety of contemporary lyric poems that employ wedding references, initially ones written by other authors and then a selection of my own poems written for this study. I also relate the research process to my own creative work, addressing the connection between the two in relation to the contemporary debate about practice-led research and research-led practice, concluding that the research and practice elements are necessarily interwoven.

My thesis shows that it is a great oversimplification to define contemporary lyric poetry in a way that denies it a narrative function, as has been routine. Storytelling is manifest in our daily lives, and is arguably an essential characteristic of language use. It is a key human tendency that equips us better to communicate with one another and it is just as indigenous to lyric poetry as to other forms of textual communication, even though its traces may sometimes be fainter. A poem might be said to show narrative qualities even when it is very brief and personal, often through quite deliberate reliance on the reader completing the text by invoking personal knowledge of human behaviour, rites of passage and social practices.

In summary, the lyric poem can be said to operate in a narrative mode as part of the poet's and the reader's process of making meaning through language. This is exemplified by the lyric wedding poem.