

THEME:

THE LIGHTER

SIDE

GUIDE FOR READING

Casey at the Bat

Narrative Poetry

Narrative poetry is poetry that tells a story. Like a short story, a narrative poem has a plot, characters, a setting, and a theme. Unlike a short story, it is written in verse, language with a definite rhythm, or "beat." In many, but not all, narrative poems, the verses rhyme. Narrative poems, like other kinds of poetry, are often divided into stanzas, or groups of lines that form a unit, rather like paragraphs in prose. The stanzas of a poem usually have the same number of lines and the same rhyme pattern.

Ernest Lawrence Thayer

(1863–1940) was born in California. He worked there and in New York as a newspaper writer and often published his poems in the newspapers on which he worked. Today, Thayer is remembered best for one work, "Casey at the Bat." This humorous poem grew out of his love of baseball, with its style at least partly reflecting Thayer's work as a reporter. In fact, you could almost read it as a sports story in verse. "Casey at the Bat" was popularized by a comedian, De Wolf Hopper,

Focus

What sport do you most enjoy watching? Get together with other students who also enjoy this sport and recall the most suspenseful moments you ever witnessed. What made these moments so exciting? Then read "Casey at the Bat" to see what happens in the ninth inning of a hotly contested baseball game.

Vocabulary

Knowing the following words will help you as you read "Casey at the Bat."

pallor (pal' ər) *n.*: Paleness (p. 521)

wreathed (rēthd) *v.*: Curled around (p. 521)

writhing (rīth' īŋ) *v.*: Twisting, turning (p. 522)

tumult (tūm' məlt) *n.*: Noisy commotion (p. 522)

MULTICULTURAL CONNECTION

Baseball: National and International

When "Casey at the Bat" first appeared, baseball was rapidly becoming the national pastime of the United States. The game probably evolved from the game of rounders, which also involved hitting a ball with a bat. In rounders, however, a fielder put a runner out by actually hitting him with the ball.

Brought by English colonists. English colonists brought rounders with them to the American colonies in the 1700's. By the mid-nineteenth century, rounders had become baseball, largely through the efforts of the sportsman Alexander Cartwright. In 1845, he founded the first organized baseball club—the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York. He also set down the first rules for the game.

In 1846 the first official baseball game was played in Hoboken, New Jersey, by Cartwright's team and the New York Nine. The man who wrote the rulebook had the unpleasant experience of seeing his team lose, 23 to 1!

From local game to national pastime. The Civil War made the game a national diversion. Confederate prisoners watched with fascination as Union soldiers from the North-east played baseball in camp. After the war, soldiers from other parts of the country brought the game home with them.

In 1869 the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first truly professional ball team with every team member paid for his efforts. For the next fifty years, baseball was played somewhat differently from the way it is today because the ball was heavier and had less bounce. Unable to hit the ball long distances, batters tried to place it strategically. Base stealing and bunting were therefore more common than they are today.

Given the importance of base running, it is not surprising that the real-life player who rivaled the fictional Casey in popularity was a champion base runner, King Kelly. Fans of the late 1800's cheered him on to home plate with cries of "Slide, Kelly, slide!"

The Negro leagues. Banned from playing professional baseball with white players, black players established their own teams as early as the 1880's. By 1920 they had organized their own national league. In the early days, players slept in second-rate motels and played in rundown stadiums. Soon, however, Negro league players enjoyed celebrity status in the black community. As the leagues' popularity grew, teams were able to afford their own stadiums and travel the country in luxurious Pullman train cars.

Major league baseball was finally integrated in 1947 when Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers. This opened the door for other talented black ballplayers, and brought to a close an important chapter in the history of baseball in the United States.

An international pastime. Today, baseball is played around the world. It is a major sport in Puerto Rico, home of the legendary baseball player Roberto Clemente, as well as in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. It is also popular in Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, and South Africa.

In Japan baseball is as popular as sumo wrestling. Japanese teams have even hired seasoned American ballplayers to improve the performance of their home-grown players.

Research and Discuss

Find out how baseball is played in another country and present your findings to the class.

Casey at the Bat

Ernest Lawrence Thayer

Narrative
Poetry

It looked extremely rocky for the Mudville nine that day;
The score stood two to four, with but an inning left to play.
So, when Cooney died at second, and Burrows did the
same,

A pallor wreathed the features of the patrons of the game.

5 A straggling few got up to go, leaving there the rest,
With that hope which springs eternal within the human
breast.

For they thought: "If only Casey would get a whack at that,"
They'd put even money now, with Casey at the bat.

But Flynn preceded Casey, and likewise so did Blake,

10 And the former was a pudd'n, and the latter was a fake.
So on that stricken multitude a deathlike silence sat;
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a "single," to the wonderment of all.
And the much-despised Blakey "tore the cover off the ball."

15 And when the dust had lifted, and they saw what had
occurred,

There was Blakey safe at second, and Flynn a-huggin' third.

Then from the gladdened multitude went up a joyous yell—
It rumbled in the mountaintops, it rattled in the dell;¹

It struck upon the hillside and rebounded on the flat;

20 For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his
place,

There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's
face;

And when responding to the cheers he lightly doffed² his
hat,

No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the
bat.

1. **dell** (del) *n.*: Small, secluded valley.

2. **doffed** (dɔft) *v.*: Lifted.

25 Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands
with dirt,
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on
his shirt;
Then when the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his
hip,
Defiance glanced in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

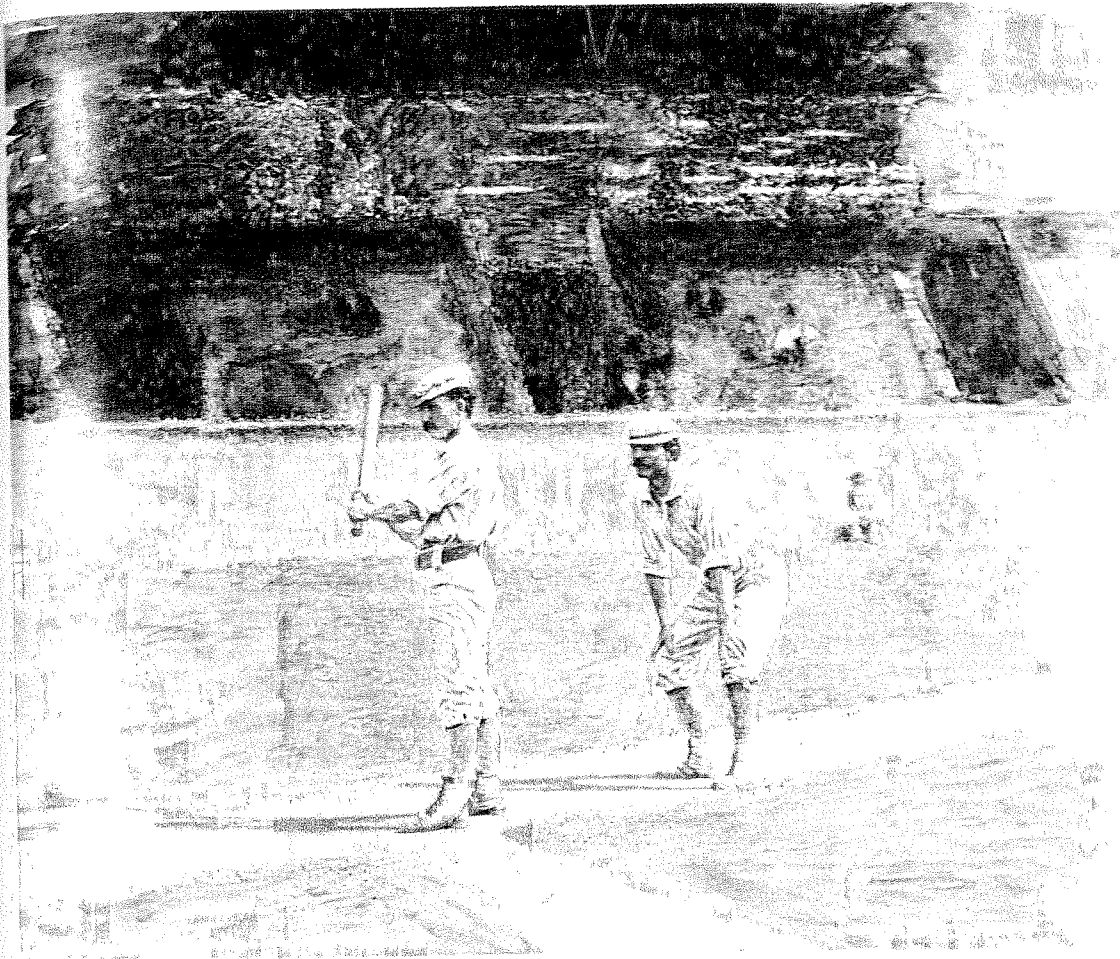
And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through
the air,
30 And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped;
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire
said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a
muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm waves on the stern and
distant shore.
35 "Kill him! kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;
And it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised
his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage³
shone;
He stilled the rising tumult, he made the game go on;
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid
flew;
40 But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike
two."

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and the echo
answered "Fraud!"
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was
awed;
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his
muscles strain,
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let the ball go by again.

3. **visage** (viz' ij) n.: Face.



BASEBALL PLAYERS PRACTICING, 1875
Thomas Eakins
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design

45 The sneer is gone from Casey's lips, his teeth are clenched
in hate,

He pounds with cruel vengeance his bat upon the plate;
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining
bright,

50 The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are
light;

And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children
shout,

But there is no joy in Mudville: Mighty Casey has struck
out.

RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

Your Response

1. Do you think that Casey's striking out was a result of overconfidence? Explain.

Recalling

2. Describe the crowd's response to Casey's coming up to bat. How does the crowd respond after each of the first two pitches to him?
3. How does the game conclude?

Interpreting

4. Describe Casey's personality.
5. Describe the tone and style of the poem. How is it different from a typical sports report?
6. Explain how the poet heightens suspense in this poem.

Applying

7. Why do you think baseball has become our national pastime? What is it about the game that captures our imagination?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Enjoying Narrative Poetry

A **narrative poem** offers two kinds of pleasure, that of a story and that of poetry. To get the most out of a narrative poem, you might have to read it over more than once to make sure you understand what all the lines mean. You also need to read with attention to the rhythm and rhyme.

1. What do you think is the chief source of pleasure in the poem, the suspenseful story or the rhythm, rhyme, and colorful language? Explain.
2. If this poem were retold as a story, what kinds of details would probably be added to it?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

* Paraphrasing Poetry

A **paraphrase** is a restatement of a poem in the reader's own words. Paraphrasing is the best

way to clarify passages that are hard to understand because of unfamiliar words, unusual sentence structure, or other difficulties presented by poetical language. The following is a paraphrase of the first stanza: The Mudville team's situation was bad. They were losing 4–2 in the ninth inning. When two of their baserunners were called out at second base, their fans became pale with gloom.

Paraphrase stanzas 5, 8, 9, and 10.

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing Narrative Verse

Write a stanza or two that presents your own ending for "Casey at the Bat." You may change Thayer's ending if you wish, or you may add to it. (For example, you might want to describe Casey after he has struck out.) Follow Thayer's stanza pattern: four lines, with six or seven "beats" per line and rhymes in the pattern *day/play, same/game*. When you revise, try to make your verses sound as much as possible like those in the poem.

LEARNING OPTIONS

1. **Language.** Sports jargon is special words and phrasing used by athletes and sports reporters to refer to specific aspects of a sport. It is used in sports writing and broadcasts, often adding color to a sports story. For example, the phrase "the hot corner" is baseball jargon meaning "third base" as a fielding position. Make a list of sports jargon you know, including that found in "Casey at the Bat." Set up each word or phrase like a standard dictionary entry and exchange entries with a classmate.
2. **Performance.** Have you ever heard sportscasters comment on a game or race? What techniques did they use to make their coverage seem interesting? Read this poem aloud to the class as if you were delivering a sportscast.