

Children's Poetry



The origins of children's verse can be traced back to the tradition of nursery rhymes (oral) and religious verse (written).

Nursery rhymes are traditional poems passed down from one generation to another. They belonged to the oral tradition until they began to be recorded in different collections in the 18th century. The most popular collection of **nursery rhymes** is that of Mother Goose. The origins of this name are obscure, the poems were not written by a goose, but for some reason the idea of literature for the young became connected with the name of Goose. Charles Perrault published a collection of fairy tales in 1697 under the title *Tales of Mother Goose*.

This body of verse is very eclectic. The collection includes everything from prayers like "Now I lay me down to sleep", to counting out rhymes like "Eena meena mina no", from parts of old ballads like "Lavender's blue, diddle diddle" to tongue twisters like "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers".

The rhymes have become separated from their original contexts and authors. Some of the authors are known, but others are not. Some critics believe that rhymes hide meanings of a political or sexual kind, and deal with violent themes. However, the sources and meaning of nursery rhymes —political, children's games in the playground, etc— are less important than the fact that these poems were passed on because they were easy to remember. In this case, memorability is more important than authorship and meaning. What makes nursery rhymes easy to remember is not their content, but its repetitive structure, strong rhymes and repetitions of words and phrases. They exaggerate the basic characteristics of language. This redundancy makes the rhymes a pleasure to hear and a pleasure to say. The effect of the rhymes does not depend on their subjects, but on the language patterns formed by the words used to describe those subjects. In the case of riddles –"Humpty Dumpty" or "Little Nancy Etticoat"–, the answers to them are not as memorable as the riddling descriptions.

Although we today associate children's verse with something light and cheerful, for most of its history it was much more stern and **religious**. "In Adam's fall / We sinned all" is the couplet that introduced the young Puritan students of *The New England Primer* (1690) both to the alphabet and to humanity's dreadful state. Puritans saw children as necessarily disobedient (like Adam) and needing to be instructed in fear of God and fear for their immortal souls. This view permeates the writings of the two

founding fathers of children's poetry, John Bunyan (*A Book for Boys and Girls; or Country Rhymes for Children*, 1686) and Isaac Watts (*Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, 1715).

Throughout the 19th century, poetry for children began to break away from its twin traditions of nursery verse and religious verse, becoming lighter and increasingly secular. Around 1860, children's poetry began to take on the features familiar to twenty-first century readers, particularly in the form of its humour. Two men were central in defining the comic and especially nonsense elements of the changing genre: Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.

Londoner artist **Edward Lear** was hired by the Earl of Derby to make drawings of his private collection of animals and birds. Curiously, Lear is not remembered for these illustrations but for the creations that he produced hastily in the nursery to amuse the children of the mansion, Lord Derby's grandchildren and others. Lear preferred the company of the children than of Lord Derby's social circle and he would write poems for the children that he would illustrate with a humorous sketch. He wrote these poems only to delight the children with no plans to publish them, but they eventually became popular with adults too and were published under titles such as *A Book of Nonsense* (1846) or *More Nonsense: Pictures, Rhymes, Botany* (1872). The first edition of *A Book of Nonsense* was published under a pseudonym due to the lightness of the poems. The verse form that Lear used was a modified version of the **limerick**, with the rhyme scheme *aaba*, the third line having an internal rhyme. The limericks generally revolve around the peculiar things that happen to eccentric or ridiculous adults. They are humorous due to the absurd nature of the characters and the situations described, a sense of humour that Lear shared with children.

Lear's illustrations greatly enhanced the humorous impact of the poems. They distort the features of the characters and ignore common rules of proportion. Lear originally drew many of the pictures while surrounded by a room full of excited children, and this undoubtedly contributed to the pictures' spontaneous and almost childlike quality. He invented **nonsense creatures**, fantastic animals and plants. He also invented **nonsense words**, such as the "Fizzgiggious fish", the "Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo", "Zigzag Zealous Zebra", or "Jellibolee". Nonsense words are playful and amusing, encouraging children to experiment with language and its rules, and to practice subtle variations in the sound patterns of their language. Nursery rhymes are rich in nonsense language: sequences like "hickory dickory dock", "humpty dumpty", "jack and jill", "feedle-dee-dee" make changes on a single word or play with similar sound combinations. What attracts children to nonsense literature (words, rhymes) is the importance of sound over sense. Nonsense words are usually phonetic in their spelling—they are written as they are pronounced—and, despite their lack of sense, are within the phonetic system of the language. They give children an opportunity to practice the subtle variations of the sound patterns of their language. From a

psychological perspective, nonsense literature expands the imagination of the child, and invites him to question the reality given by adults.

When compared with most of the books that adults wrote for children during the first half of the 19th century, *A Book of Nonsense* is revolutionary because it is not didactic, because he uses humour, because of the comical violence that ran through many of his limericks and because of the non-realistic nature of the illustrations, which were rather modern and abstract and would influence 20th century illustrators such as Dr Seuss. Following the publication of *A Book of Nonsense*, several other writers began to take an interest in nonsense literature. **Lewis Carroll**, Lear's contemporary, included a number of nonsense poems in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Carroll followed Lear's tradition of light verse (secular, non-didactic, non-sentimental) parodying serious poems such as Isaac Watts's. In his parody, Carroll emphasizes childhood playfulness, fantasy, laughter and even idleness: Watt's poem "Against Idleness and Mischief", "How doth the little busy bee / improve each shining hour" becomes in Carroll's hands "How doth the little crocodile / Improve its shining tail". In the 20th century, Lear influenced such authors as Roald Dahl, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) or Shel Silverstein. The poetry that dominates today is joking and carefree.

A. A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We are Six* (1927) mark the transition into twentieth-century poetry for children. Milne follows the tradition of Carroll, presenting a non-sentimental picture of childhood. Other antecedents include Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* (1872) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). Milne emphasizes the "superegotism" and rebellious thoughts of children, which prevents him from falling into sentimentality. His children live in a world largely controlled by adults, whose values and requirements often annoy and make little sense to them. Although Milne dedicated *When We Were Very Young* to his son Christopher Robin –the addressee for the *Winnie the Pooh* stories, as we will see-, the child in the poems is sometimes Christopher Robin, sometimes Milne as a child and sometimes the child or any child. Milne's intention is to entertain. His poems are clever and amusing, but not deep. As in the Pooh stories, he does not attempt to offer a general vision of childhood, but portrays a small world of everyday things where good humour and happy endings predominate. His poetry is elegant, well-crafted, and reflects the atmosphere of an upper-middle-class English household in the 1920s (wealthy houses, beautiful parks, uniformed nannies, the nursery, amusements).

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