



A peer-reviewed student publication
of the University at Buffalo
Department of Library and Information Studies

Poetry in children's literature: Development of a genre

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Library Student Journal,
November 2006

Abstract

This literature survey traces the development of poetry for children, primarily in the United States and Great Britain. Poetry published for children is rooted in oral literature, such as lullabies, ballads, and nursery rhymes. Early poetry printed specifically for children was most often instructional, morally edifying, and rhymed in order to aid in memorization. As Puritanism waned and new ideas about childhood and education emerged, poets began writing not only to instruct children, but also to tell a story and entertain. The acceptance of fantasy in the 19th century paved the way for a blossoming of poetry for children in the 20th century, encompassing elements of storytelling, fantasy, humor, light verse, multiculturalism, and social change. Ongoing advances in printing technology also affected developments in illustration. More recent trends include an increasingly visual approach to poetry in children's picture books; novels in verse; a revival of young adult interest and participation in poetry; and the innovative use of electronic formats, sometimes in ways that reconnect poetry with its oral roots. Poetry for children continues to flourish and evolve because of

the capacity for perception and imagination shared by children and poets.

Poetry in Children's Literature: Development of a Genre

From its origins as an orally expressed art, poetry has always been used to instruct and entertain children. But it is more than a simple pedagogical tool—while shaping the development of children for countless generations, it has affected their literature as a whole and evolved as a genre, reflecting historical and social contexts.

From the Oral Tradition to the Printing Press

Before the advent of the printing press and mass access to the written word, hand-produced books were available to those who could afford them. Primarily lesson books, many were written in rhyme. Most children, lacking these books, instead absorbed whatever appealed to them from the body of oral literature they heard (Sutherland, 1997). Poetic forms of these literary nuggets might include lullabies, work songs, ballads, and nursery rhymes in part or whole. Elements of poetry, such as alliteration, rhyme, meter, and rhythm aided the memorization and retention of oral literature. Imagery depended not on pictures, which were mostly unavailable, but on the imagination.

However, as early as the 15th century, printers produced literary texts aimed at children, not to entertain with stories, but to

educate. "Courtesy books," as these early texts were called, emphasized manners and behavior. With the exception of early Latin grammar texts, the first book known to be printed for children conveyed lessons in table manners within rhyming quatrains. One example, *Les Contenances de la Table*, was published in France around 1487 (Sutherland, 1997). Courtesy book admonitions were often presented in rhyme in order to aid memory (Townsend, 1992). An excerpt from "Symon's Lesson of Wisdom for All Manner Children" from *The Babees' Book* provides an example of the emphasis on instruction, rather than literary quality:

Child, climb not over house nor wall
For no fruit nor birds nor ball.
Child, over men's houses no stones
fling
Nor at glass windows no stones
sling...
Child, keep thy book, cap and gloves
And all things that thee behoves,
And but thou do, thou shalt fare worse
And thereto be beat on the bare erse
(as quoted in Townsend, 1992, pp.
3-4).

Nonetheless, as Townsend (1992) puts it, "verse could sugar the instructional pill" (p. 103).

While most verse for children at this time was designed to teach morals and manners, an interesting twist is found in the *Booke in Englyssh metre of the great marchaunt man called Dyves Pragmaticus, very pretye for chyl dren to rede*, written by Thomas Newbery in 1563. Although instructional, the subject is not manners but commerce, specifically wares and implements. In this excerpt, the author's use of alliteration and rhyme moderately sweetens ingestion of the lesson, which is to be able to "rede and write Wares and Implements in this worlde contayned:"

I have Suchet, Surrip, Grene Ginger
and Marmalade,
Bisket, Cumfecte and Carraways as
fine as can be made,
As for Poticary and Grocery, I have all
that trade

You shall se of all thynges, come
hether to me.
I have here to sell fine Needells and
Thimbels
Nayle pearsers, smalle podde
Chyselles and Wimbels
Blades, and for weavers fine Shuttells
and Brembils,
What do you lacke friend? come
hether to me (as quoted in
Townsend, 1992, p. 104).

In 1646, John Cotton wrote the first book for children known to be published in the New World, *Milk for Babes, Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments, Chiefly for the Spirituall Nourishment of Boston Babes in either England, but may be of like Use for any Children*. A competently crafted summary of Puritan theology in verse, it begins:

Who is the Maker of all things?
The Almighty God who reigns on high.
He form'd the earth, He spread the
sky (as quoted in Sutherland, 1997,
p. 45).

Another Puritan title popular at the time, *A Looking Glass for Children* (1672), offers these chilling words:

Hath God such comeliness bestowed
And on me made to dwell,
'Tis pity such a pretty maid
As I should go to Hell (as quoted in
Townsend, 1992, p. 6).

John Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686), written in verse for children and later issued as *Divine Emblems* (1724), is not as well-known as his *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which was written in prose for adults. Nor is it likely to be read by contemporary children, primarily due to the grimness of its verses. *The New England Primer*, first published in 1680, became the primary reading material for children in colonial America (Townsend, 1992). It contains a variety of pictures and verses—all intended for moral and reading instruction—and is known for its rhymes and woodcuts (one for each letter of the alphabet). The first verse remains famous: "In Adams fall/We sinned all." Numerous

editions of the book have been published in the centuries that followed.

Another publication of note was Perrault's collection of folk tales, subtitled "Tales of Mother Goose," first produced in France in 1697 and translated into English by R. Sember in 1729 as a chapbook, an inexpensively produced booklet (Arbuthnot, 1964). The stories were told in prose, but carried on the association of didacticism with rhyme by concluding with one or more rhymed morals.

The virtues of verse for its instructional value were extolled by Dr. Isaac Watts in the preface to his tremendously popular *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (1715):

There is a greater Delight in the very Learning of Truths and Duties this way. There is something so amusing and entertaining in Rhymes and Metre, that will incline Children to make this part of their business a Diversion...What is learnt in Verse is longer retain'd in Memory, and sooner recollected. The like Sounds and the like number of Syllables exceedingly assist the remembrance (as quoted in Townsend, 1992, p. 104).

Watts, however, used "Rhymes and Metre" more artfully than his published predecessors. His *Divine and Moral Songs* were so successful that six or seven hundred editions of the book were published over the following two centuries in England and America (Townsend, 1992). "Cradle Hymn" was included in later editions of *The New England Primer* and other verses were so well known that several were parodied by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* some 150 years later. Townsend identifies Dr. Watts as the first poet for children and credits his popularity to "the limpid simplicity and memorability of the verses" rather than their didactic value (p. 104). However, new ways of thinking were also a factor. The 30 years which passed between Bunyan and Watts fomented a profound softening of the Puritan outlook. As an example, Townsend compares Bunyan's verse on bees from *Divine Emblems* ("Now wouldst thou have the Honey and be

free/From stinging, in the first place kill the Bee/This Bee an Emblem truly is of sin") with Watts' ("How doth the little busy bee/Improve each shining hour") (pp. 10-11). Townsend concludes that beliefs that emphasized God's wrath were metamorphosing into a more rational theology that focused on God's love and majesty.

From Didacticism to Diversion

Alongside Watts, the versifier most significant to children over the next 75 years was Mother Goose. Uncertainty surrounds the first publication date of "her" rhymes, which cannot be attributed to any one author, having arisen over many decades from the oral tradition. Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* (1729) helped popularize the fanciful name, but contained stories, not the well-known rhymes. A collection titled *Tommy Thumb's Song Book*, published in 1744 by a Mrs. Cooper of Paternoster Row, included numerous well-known nursery rhymes, but not the Mother Goose moniker. Some scholars have argued that John Newbery, the first publisher of English children's books, produced a Mother Goose collection between 1760 and 1766. However, no copy of the book, nor any contemporary reference to its existence, has been found. An advertisement placed in the January 2, 1781, *London Chronicle* by T. Carnan, the stepson of Newbery, announced the publication of *Mother Goose's Melody*, but no copy of that edition has been discovered, either. However, just a few years later, in 1785, Isaiah Thomas printed the first American edition, also titled *Mother Goose's Melody*, quite possibly pirated from an earlier Newbery version (Sutherland, 1997)¹.

Mother Goose rhymes provided—and still provide—children with an introduction to poetic elements such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and meter. With their sing-song quality and variety of topics and types—alphabet, proverbs, verse stories, songs, nonsense, and tongue twisters, to name a few—the rhymes range from nonsensical to instructional. Most of the verses are brief, the stories concise and full of action. Though often disregarded as

literature, these verses have survived and thrived throughout the transition from oral to written literature.

Whether or not John Newbery published the first Mother Goose, he apparently produced the only other noteworthy book with poetry for children during that time period. *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) was a miscellany which included rhymed games, morals, and alphabets, as well as some poems. The book was significant for its stated intention, which included not only "instruction" but also "amusement" and "diversion." As Arbuthnot (1964) remarks, "Here is a new approach to books for children and a momentous one. It marks the beginning of English books for their delight!" (p. 37).

Newbery's contribution to children's literature was part of a larger movement toward the expansion of social, intellectual, and literary ideas. According to Townsend (1992):

The 1740s are commonly regarded as the decade in which both the English novel and the English children's book got under way. It seems clear that the beginnings of both are connected not only with new ways of thought but also with the rise and growing refinement of the middle classes in the eighteenth century (p. 3).

A great deal of the responsibility for this change in thinking must be ascribed to the philosopher John Locke, whose *Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693, put forth the idea of the child's mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank page. His advocacy for milder, more enjoyable ways of learning did much to change thinking about childhood and education (Townsend, 1992). While morals and education were still important, Locke wrote that a child should have:

some easy, pleasant book, suited to his capacity...wherein the entertainment that he finds might draw him on and reward his pains in reading...and yet not such as should fill his head with perfectly useless trumpery, or lay the principles of vice

and folly. (as quoted in Townsend, 1992, p. 12)

The distinctions—and overlap—between didacticism and diversion were beginning to be explored. While "useless trumpery" was clearly not desirable, Locke identified the value of entertainment as a motivator for learning to read, much as Watts before him had recommended the use of rhyme and meter to aid in the retention of moral learning. Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* synthesized the two trends and put them to practical use—the creation of popular books that both entertained and educated children.

The Unleashing of Imagination

William Blake expanded upon the concept of combining edification with entertainment. In the Introduction to his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), Blake concludes his first poem with the verse:

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear
And I wrote my happy songs
Ev'ry child may joy to hear (as quoted
in Townsend, 1992, p. 105).

Blake also hand-colored each poem with ornamental designs. Blake's lyrical verses, with their musical cadences and emotional resonance, heralded the movement toward romantic poetry. Unfortunately, as Zena Sutherland (1997) states, "Though it is now considered an epoch-making book, it caused no stir at the time of its publication" (p. 51). During his lifetime, Blake wrote in obscurity for both children and adults. Later, as he became recognized as a major poet of the Western literary tradition, his *Songs of Innocence* became paired in the literary canon with a book written for adults, *Songs of Experience* (Townsend, 1992).

Much more popular, and immediately so, were the works of Ann and Jane Taylor, whose *Original Poems for Infant Minds*, published in 1804, contained one of the most sentimental and beloved poems of the century, "My Mother." The book was translated into several languages and

remains best known today for the poem "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," which was authored by Jane (and later also parodied by Lewis Carroll). Additionally, the sisters wrote *Rhymes for the Nursery* (1806) and *Hymns for Infant Minds* (1808). *Original Poems* follows Watts' tradition of moral instruction, but with a livelier bent toward vigorous storytelling (Arbuthnot, 1964).

The development of poetry for children thus far can be traced from its beginnings in rhyme, to its use as a tool for instruction, and finally to a genre that elicited delight in the telling of a story, evoked a mood, or reveled in the sounds and rhythms of language. Although weak on plot, the next significant work in the history of children's poetry exemplifies this progression: William Roscoe's *The Butterfly's Ball*, published in 1807 in England, is both a poem and a children's picture book in the modern sense—text and pictures are fully integrated. Its primary distinction is as the first book written for children just for fun. Attractively illustrated, containing one couplet and illustration per page, the book is not noted by current standards for its remarkable literary value (Townsend, 1992). Yolen describes the book as an "overly long talking animal verse poem" (1993, p. 5). It is significant, however, precisely for its complete lack of instructional value. For the first time in the history of children's literature, no moral was included, no lesson conveyed. Like many of the old Mother Goose rhymes, this story-poem and its imaginative illustrations seem to exist solely to delight. *The Butterfly's Ball* was immensely popular, spawning dozens of imitators and paving the way for freer development of the poetic imagination.

An even more popular and long-lived work, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, published in 1823 in the United States and attributed (incorrectly) to Clement C. Moore², is still reprinted and widely read today. The story-poem is fast-moving, humorous, and devoid of warnings and morals. Another story-poem, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* by Robert Browning (1842) shares the humor and pacing of *A Visit from St. Nicholas*; however, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* contained two important features that separated it from the

former: a clear thematic moral combined with elements of fantasy. The fanciful was clearly on the rise.

Nonsense and the Birth of Modern Children's Poetry

Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* of 1846, a collection of absurd limericks with Lear's illustrations, marked the beginning of the next stage of development in poetry for children. It begins:

There was an Old Man with a beard,
who said, "It is just as I feared!—
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a
Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"
(1980)

Lear later wrote nonsense stories in verse, including some that are still widely known, such as "The Jumblies" and "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" from *Nonsense Songs* (1870). *Laughable Lyrics* followed in 1871. By then, that other master of nonsense verse, Lewis Carroll, had produced *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which consists mostly of verse parodies, and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), which contains more original verse. While Carroll was widely inventive and satirical, Lear "was a poet, in a sense in which the word cannot quite be applied to Carroll" (Townsend, 1992, p. 109). Together, the two writers inaugurated a new era in which fantasy became prominent as a genre (Disbrow, 2004).

According to Vasilakis (1995), "The nonsense verse of the nineteenth century could be considered the beginnings of modern children's poetry" (p. 528). Once literature for children in general, and poetry in particular, were freed up to encompass wild invention, storytelling, and fantasy, these elements took root and blossomed in poetry for children. In 1862, the poet and artist Christina Rossetti created an original fairy story, *Goblin Market*, in free-flowing, fast-moving verse, which was widely popular and praised by critics. *Sing-Song* (1872) was a collection of rhymes for young children, lighthearted but quieter in tone. Her

poems continue to be anthologized and reprinted, as in the 1991 fully-illustrated collection *Fly Away, Fly Away Over the Sea*.

Kate Greenaway made her debut in 1878 with *Under the Window*, a collection of her own rhymes and illustrations, which became amazingly popular almost overnight, not only in Britain, where it was printed, but also in America and continental Europe. Printer Edmund Evans produced the book using an expensive process that yielded superior graphic results for its day. Initial sales of *Under the Window* reached some 70,000 copies (Arbuthnot, 1964). *The Language of Flowers* (1884) and *Marigold Garden* (1885) followed, also meeting with great success. Although Greenaway wrote the verses for *Under the Window* and *Marigold Garden*, she is remembered primarily for her work as an illustrator. "Kate Greenaway's verses are innocuous, ordinary, and of no significance away from the pictures; but the pictures are an endless delight" (Townsend, 1992, p. 119). She went on to illustrate the works of other writers, in *Mother Goose* (1881), *Little Ann and Other Poems* (1882-3) by Ann and Jane Taylor, and a picture-book version of Browning's *Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1888).

Around the same time, a landmark of children's poetry appeared in Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, first published in 1885 as *Penny Whistles*. It contains a favorite poem of childhood, "The Swing":

How do you like to go up in a swing,
Up in the air so blue?
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing
Ever a child can do!
Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all
Over the countryside—
Till I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roof so brown—
Up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down!
(1995, p. 52)

In Arbuthnot's (1964) assessment, "*A Child's Garden of Verses* goes far beyond Greenaway at her best, both in its reflection of the child's point of view and in its poetry"

(p. 141). Stevenson was already widely known for his essays and fiction, so his poems for children found a ready audience. His writing continues to be anthologized as well as produced in picture book format in such works as *My Shadow* (1990), illustrated by Ted Rand. New editions of *A Child's Garden of Verses* appear at least once per decade.

As the 19th century neared the 20th, several new poets for children emerged. Eugene Field published a collection of poems called *Lullaby Land* (1897); though popular at the time, "Wynken, Blynken and Nod" is now the only poem much remembered. Fellow American James Whitcomb Riley remains known primarily for "Little Orphant Annie," particularly the enduring refrain:

The gobble-uns'll git you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out! (as quoted in
Townsend, 1992, p. 111)

During his lifetime, Riley garnered considerable acclaim as a poet for children. His use of colloquialism and folk dialect is notable, and the success of his rhythmic, chantable verses demonstrate a popular acceptance of non-standard English, at least when it was used creatively for literary fun.

The 20th Century: Variety and Visuals

As the century turned, poetry for children began to develop a wider range of expression. *Johnny Crow's Garden*, written and illustrated by Englishman Leslie Brooke in 1903, was a successful early pioneer of the single-poem picture-book format. It was followed by *Johnny Crow's Party* (1907). Another American who wrote verse for children at this time was Laura Richards, who Arbuthnot (1964) describes as "the American Poet Laureate of Nonsense for Children" (p. 123). Though she wrote frequently for the popular children's magazine *St. Nicholas*, her first and most well-known book, *Tirra Lirra*, wasn't published until 1932. Richards told

humorous stories in lyrical verse, full of word play, surprises, and nonsense.

Around the same time, the English poets Walter de la Mare and Eleanor Farjeon wrote poetry and prose for adults and children. Arbuthnot (1964) describes de la Mare's works as containing "wonder, melody, and sheer beauty" with poems often asking an "unanswered question" (pp. 183, 186). *Peacock Pie* (1917) and *Rhymes and Verses* (1947) are de la Mare's best known poetry collections, and his work was well received by critics of the early century (Vasilakis, 1995). Arbuthnot describes Farjeon thus: "The poetry of Eleanor Farjeon cuts across any classification which could be devised. She writes skillful nonsense verse, her lyrics are tender and beautiful and her verses reflect a sure knowledge of the child's world and wonderment" (p. 145). Her books of poetry include *Eleanor Farjeon's Poems for Children* (1951), *The Children's Bells* (1960), and *Kings and Queens* (1983). The poems of Richards, de la Mare, and Farjeon still appear today in anthologies and magazines for children.

Two other well-known American poets—Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg—must also be mentioned. Although today Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories* is probably more widely recognized than his poems, his two books of poetry for children, *Early Moon* (1930) and *Wind Song* (1960), are part of the poetry canon for children (Sutherland, 1997). Several picture book versions of Frost's poems have appeared, especially "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which also continues to be anthologized³.

Still other wonderful poets include A. A. Milne, with his tender, child-centered poems in *When We Were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We Are Six* (1927), which proved tremendously popular. Rachel Field's first book of poetry for children, *The Pointed People* (1924) had to compete with Milne's *When We Were Very Young*, but nonetheless succeeded in attracting a positive reception. Zena Sutherland (1997) suggests that "Field's unique contribution to children's verse is perhaps the three groups of city poems in her *Taxis and Toadstools*" (pp. 293-4), which was published in 1926,

two years after the publication of *When We Were Very Young*. Field's poem "A Road Might Lead to Anywhere" was most recently produced as a picture book in 1990. Elizabeth Coatsworth, who won the Newbery Medal in 1930 for her fiction story *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, also wrote poetry, including the collections *Summer Green* (1948), *Poems* (1957), *The Sparrow Bush* (1966), and *Down Half the World* (1968). A prolific writer, Coatsworth frequently incorporated poems into her fiction (Silvey, 1995).

Another writer of verse destined for fame in the United States—and eventually the world—emerged in the years prior to World War II: Theodore Seuss Geisel, Dr. Seuss, published his rhymed narrative *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* in 1937. While most of his works favor story over poetry, they carry on the traditions of both imaginative nonsense and verse in storytelling for children. Interestingly, they also represent a return to the moral tradition of early children's poetry. As Carol Hurst (1999) observes, "Seuss was one of the few authors of children's books who could get away with moralizing. His zany illustrations and rhymes allow the reader to enjoy the books and recognize the morals without feeling the weight of a sermon" (§6). Hurst also points out that "even though he has been a favorite of several generations of children, it is only in recent years that children's literature writers and critics have even deigned to mention his name. No one has ever claimed that Seuss was a great poet, although many of his books use rhyme" (§1). Indeed, neither the third nor ninth editions of *Children and Books* include Geisel in their poetry sections, preferring instead to categorize his work as "humorous fantasy." However, Geisel's contribution to the development of a genre of books that has grown immensely in popularity, the beginning reader, cannot be dismissed. Hurst (1999) suggests he "revolutionized" the beginning reader with his *Cat in the Hat* (1957), using a controlled list of 223 words from the Dolch reading list. Arbuthnot (1964), however, took a less favorable view: "Unfortunately, when Dr. Geisel harnesses his original genius to the bandwagon of the easy-to-read, the resulting books lack the sparkle and gaiety of his other work" (p.

366). This is largely a matter of taste, of course, but time appears to favor Hurst's view. In March 2004, the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dr. Seuss was celebrated in schools and libraries nationwide, and *The Cat in the Hat* remains a staple for beginning readers. Using simple rhyme and extravagant imagination, Geisel modernized and expanded upon the newer tradition of nonsense verse in children's literature, and the older tradition of using verse as an aid to learning—in this case, learning to read.

The early-to-mid-20th century saw the emergence of several important poets for children, including Langston Hughes, David McCord, Harry Behn, Aileen Fisher, and Theodore Roethke. Hughes wrote mostly for adults, but created the poems in *The Dream Keeper* (1932) specifically for children. He spoke often in terms of racial identity as an African-American, but his best-loved poems transcend race to address all humanity. Hughes, who was part of the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s and early 1930s, was the first African-American poet of note to be widely read by children. David McCord's critically acclaimed poetry for children spanned the decades between 1950 and 1970, with *Far and Few* (1952) and *Take Sky* (1962) being two of the best known. His many works often contain humor and spontaneity. Sutherland (1997) describes him as a poet who "savors language, but...holds it—like the master craftsman he is—firmly in check" (p. 295). Regarding McCord's importance to children's literature, Vasilakis (1995) declares, "The mid-century children's poet whose body of work surpasses all others...is David McCord" (p. 529). Harry Behn also created several volumes of poetry for children during this period, including *Cricket Songs* (1964), a translation of Japanese haiku. Aileen Fisher, whose poems focused on the relationship between children and nature, enjoyed a long career from the 1950s to the 1980s as the author of such works as *Going Barefoot* (1960), *Up Up the Mountain* (1968), *Feathered Ones and Furry* (1971), and *Out in the Dark and the Daylight* (1980). Theodore Roethke, a highly respected and honored poet for adults, produced two volumes for children: *I am!* *Says the Lamb* (1961), and *Dirty Dinky and*

Other Creatures (1973). Other poems by Roethke are included in anthologies for children, and are particularly regarded for their wit, ebullience, and humor (Sutherland, 1997).

The 1960s represented a decade of change in children's literature that reflected the social and political upheaval taking place in America at the time. Vasilakis (1995) writes:

During the sixties American poets began to explore new subjects, ones they felt drew a more accurate picture of their own time. Issues of war and peace, social injustice and racial prejudice, technology and urban life were addressed in children's poetry for the first time. Poets also began to experiment with new forms, such as free verse, concrete poetry, and the use of dialect. (p. 529)

May Swenson expanded the usual boundaries of poetry by creating free verse poems that formed riddles, puzzles, and patterns in *Poems to Solve* (1966) and *More Poems to Solve* (1971). Eve Miriam also explored writing in free verse, and pushed the limits of what were considered suitable topics for children. Miriam's *The Inner City Mother Goose* (1969) caused substantial controversy for its focus on the social problems faced by inner city children, prompting some to call for its ban (Silvey, 1995).

Building upon Geisel's efforts, John Ciardi experimented with using controlled word lists to write *I Met a Man* (1961) and *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* (1962) for beginning readers. Ciardi used poetry to help children recognize words, observing that "poetry is especially well designed to lead the child to such recognition...for rhyme and pattern are always important clues" (as quoted in Sutherland, 1997, p. 298). Regarded by critics then and now as an accomplished verbal craftsman, Ciardi wrote other well-known and well-received poem collections, including *The Reason for the Pelican* (1959) and *The King Who Saved Himself from Being Saved* (1965). The use of poetry as an aid to learning in books for children was nothing new, dating back at

least two centuries to Dr. Watts and others. However, Theodore Geisel and John Ciardi modernized the effort by combining humor, nonsense, fantasy, and deliberately controlled vocabularies for the purpose of learning to read.

Poetic subjects and forms continued to broaden in accordance with the changing social and political climate in America as "a new awareness of the country's cultural diversity led to the publication of a greater number of African American poets" (Vasilakis, 1995, p. 529). In 1956, with her book *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), Gwendolyn Brooks became one of the first poets whose work illuminated the lives of urban African American youth. Although Sutherland (1997) states that "In all her poetry there is a concern for racial and personal identity" (p. 300), Arbutnot (1964) finds that "Bronzeville Boys and Girls...will have a universal appeal because the poems speak for any child of any race" (p. 158). While Brooks utilized standard language and forms, Langston Hughes used idiomatic black speech patterns in *Don't You Turn Back* (1969), which, though written for adults, contains poems also enjoyed by youth. Other African American children's poets include Arnold Adoff and Eloise Greenfield, perhaps best known for her *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* (1978). Poets from other cultural backgrounds also began publishing for children, including Gary Soto, whose work reflected Latino culture; Hettie Jones, whose book *The Trees Stand Shining* (1971, 1993) focused on Native American themes; and James Berry, a Jamaican author.

Vasilakis (1995) identifies another development that arose during the turbulent social atmosphere of the 1960s: "the flowering of lyric poetry in free verse form" (p. 529), represented in such authors as Karla Kuskin, Siv Cedering Fox, Sylvia Cassedy, Barbara Esbensen, and Valerie Worth. However, many other poets of the last four decades of the twentieth century also used the free verse form, including Kaye Starbird, whose *A Snail's a Failure Socially* (1966), *The Pheasant on Route Seven* (1968), and *The Covered Bridge* (1979) gave special attention to the child's

view of the world. Lilian Moore used her experience as an editor and reading specialist to create the simple, fluent poems in *See My Lovely Poison Ivy* (1975) and *Something New Begins* (1982). Eve Merriam often used humor and wordplay to create her numerous books, such as *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme* (1964) and *Finding a Poem* (1970), publishing poetry for children from the 1960s to 1990s. Myra Cohn Livingston wrote, edited, and anthologized many volumes of poetry for children during a similar time period.

Many other modern poets and writers of verse deserve mention—Hilaire Belloc, Beatrice Schenk De Regniers, Roy Gerrard, Nikki Giovanni, Mary Ann Hoberman, Lee Bennett Hopkins, Ted Hughes, Randall Jarrell, X. J. Kennedy, Dennis Lee, Phyllis McGinley, Ogden Nash, Charlotte Pomerantz, Jack Prelutsky, William Jay Smith—but according to poet and anthologizer Lee Bennett Hopkins (1993), it was Shel Silverstein who was responsible for "a new revolution of light verse" (p. 203) when his *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was published in 1974. Vasilakis (1995) attributes a poetry revival to Silverstein's work, stating that "an undeniable impetus behind the increased interest in children's poetry in the last few decades has been the phenomenal popularity of Shel Silverstein's two volumes" (p. 530), referring additionally to *A Light in the Attic* (1981). Hopkins (1993) compares Silverstein to Lear: "If Edward Lear was the Lord of the Limerick of the nineteenth century, surely Silverstein is the most lauded purveyor of light verse of the twentieth" (p. 203). Though Silverstein wrote mostly shorter verses as opposed to rhymed stories, he carried on the humor and imagination of the nonsense tradition begun by Lear and expanded upon by Seuss. Jack Prelutsky continued the sub-genre in his many volumes, beginning with *Rolling Harvey Down the Hill* in 1980 and in his collaboration with Theodore Geisel on *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!* (1998), Geisel's last book.

Literary honors have reflected a revival of interest in poetry for children, as well as other contemporary trends. Nancy Willard was the first to receive a Newbery Medal for

a book of poetry for *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* (1981). With numerous references to Blake and his work, the book integrated the past and present by using Blake's poems as a springboard for new imaginings, as well as modern graphic design and production alongside a more traditional folk art style. A few years later, in 1988, Jane Yolen's *Owl Moon*, a prose poem, was awarded the Caldecott. Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* garnered the 1989 Newbery, receiving acclaim for its innovative presentation of poetry designed to be read aloud as a duet.

The 1990s took poetry a step further, blurring the distinction between prose and poetry with the publication of novels in verse. Virginia Euwer Wolff, with *Make Lemonade* (1993), and Mel Glenn, with *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Verse* (1996) are considered pioneers of the form (Sullivan, 2003). However, it was Karen Hesse (1997) who was first awarded a Newbery for a novel in verse, *Out of the Dust*, in 1998. It begins:

As summer wheat came ripe,
so did I,
born at home, on the kitchen floor.
Ma crouched,
barefoot, bare bottomed
over the swept boards,
because that's where Daddy said it'd
be best. (p.3)

Mary Nelson continued the trend with *Carver: A Life in Poems* (2001), a successful extension of poetry merging free verse with biography, which received a 2002 Boston Globe Hornbook Award along with a Newbery Honor.

Other recent trends include the increasingly complex visual treatment of poetry—a continuation of an ongoing evolution in the sophistication of artistic technique and graphic capability throughout the history of printed children's literature. The degree of illustration often relates to the type of poetry book being produced. Hopkins (1993) sorts modern poetry books into the following categories: collections of poems by individual poets, general anthologies by

various poets, specific collections based on a theme, and poetry picture books focusing on one poem by one author. While illustrations have long accompanied poetry collections for children, poetry picture books have become even more popular in recent decades (Vasilakis, 1995). Though not unheard of in previous centuries—*The Butterfly's Ball* appeared in 1807—the quality of the illustrations in early poetry picture books was not as visually arresting as those produced today, nor were as many such books published.

Some critics question whether so much illustration inhibits children's imaginations by removing the need to fabricate their own mental images (Vasilakis, 1995). In the same way that watching too much television can stunt the imagination by never requiring its use, defining a poem through illustration may rob children of the chance to experience it internally and individually, particularly when exposed to a poem for the first time during their most impressionable years. Eleanor MacDonald (1990) writes:

Nowhere is the power of the word more tangible than in poetry. It distills the human experience down to a few well-chosen images and phrases. While illustration can function to clarify meaning for the child, it will also dilute the experience and color it with the artist's interpretation. (p. 28)

Illustrated picture books that fall into the category of narrative poems with strong story lines, such as *Casey at the Bat* (illustrated in 1980 by Wallace Tripp; Barry Moser in 1988; and Christopher Bing in 2000) or *The Adventures of Isabel*, humorously illustrated by James Marshall in 1991, seem more satisfactorily suited to visual treatment. As a poem moves away from concrete images and storytelling and into the realm of interior experience, perception, emotions, and intuition, illustration runs the greater risk of limiting and characterizing the poet's words, rather than expanding and illuminating them.

Furthermore, as MacDonald (1990) points out, "The use of poem as picture book tends to stretch out and distort the patterns so

carefully selected and placed on the page by the author. The compelling rhythm of the poetry begs readers to continue while the illustration tempts him to linger. Very few poetry books successfully fully resolve this conflict." As well, book design must take into account details such as the placement of page turns to coincide with natural pauses in the reading, or the result will be a choppy rendition of what was originally carefully crafted cadence.

MacDonald (1990) cites Myra Cohn Livingston's collaborations with illustrator Leonard Everett Fisher, *A Circle of Seasons* (1982), *Earth Songs* (1984), and *Sky Songs* (1986), as successful examples of art complementing poetry. Others she recommends include *Daydreamers* (1981) by Eloise Greenfield, illustrated by Tom Feeling; *Sing a Song of People* (1987) by Lois Lenski, illustrated by Giles Larouche; Robert L. Stevenson's *Block City* (1988), illustrated by Ashley Wolff; and Ed Young's artistic interpretation of Robert Frost's *Birches* (1988). However, MacDonald criticizes Susan Jeffers' art for Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1978) for its use of overly specific images and trivialization of the poem's themes, concluding, "The major problem with illustration of poetry occurs when the poetry is at odds with or is overwhelmed by the illustrations." MacDonald identifies Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear as authors who have been frequently treated—or mistreated—in this manner.

Anthologies also reflect this trend toward visual interpretation of poetry; however, because the ratio of illustration to text is smaller, they generally avoid the dangers of text distortion found in picture books (MacDonald, 1990). While some, such as *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* (1983), *Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young* (1986), and *Sing a Song of Popcorn* (1988), are large in size and general in scope, most collections from the 1990s concentrate on specific themes, audiences, or genres and are more limited in scope (Vasilakis, 1995).

Another trend of the 1980s and 1990s has been an increased interest in poetry for and

by young adults, evident in the success of anthologies such as those edited by Paul Janeczko and Naomi Shihab Nye; the popularity of rap music, poetry slams, and magnetic poetry; and activities such as Poetry in Motion, Poems on the Underground, and National Poetry Month—all of which involve youth in creating, performing, and publishing their own poetry (Bush, 1998; Erlich, 1999). Roger Sutton (2000), in a review of Nye's anthology *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* (2000), questions the purpose of publishing youthful poetry by concluding that "children can think about and play with words to rich effect, and there's certainly merit in encouraging them to do so; what is seldom apparent is what readers are expected to gain from these less-than-revelatory efforts" (p. 472). However, the very existence of such publications indicates a strong level of interest in poetry by youth.

In a return to the trend begun in the 1960s, serious social issues such as human rights, the environment, and AIDS are being addressed in poetry for young people (Korbeck, 1995). Cultural and racial awareness has given way to a more global perspective that is exemplified by Naomi Shihab Nye's highly regarded multicultural anthology *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* (1992). The cultural expansion of children's poetry can also be seen in the review literature; in the January 2004 issue of *Book Links* alone, three new multicultural anthologies of poetry for young people were reviewed in addition to Nye's.

The 21st Century: Technology and Poetry

Interesting developments arise almost daily, it seems, from the plethora of technological and electronic formats available today. *Representative Poetry Online* (<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display/index.cfm>) is a database of almost 3,000 poems by more than 400 poets in English. Poetry Web sites designed specifically for children encourage youth to play with poetry online, learn more about poetry, and interact with others through poetry. Numerous other Web sites, such as Boston Teachnet, Education World,

PBS, Web English Teacher, and Poets House offer lesson plans for teachers for creative poetry activities⁵. Book/CD combinations such as *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath* (2001) and *Poetry Speaks to Children* (2005) bring poetry alive through modern technology, as do Web sites that offer audio readings over the Internet, such as PoetryFoundation.org (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>), Poets.org (<http://www.poets.org>), and several author Web sites.

An interesting collection that synthesizes a variety of the elements discussed in this paper—from the poetry of nursery rhymes, hymns, and ballads, to Langston Hughes' use of idiom, to multicultural awareness beginning in the 1960s, and finally, to new forms of technological expression—is *In the Hollow of Your Hand: Slave Lullabies* (2000), in which songs from the oral tradition of slaves are written, illustrated with fabric folk-art pictures, explained by collector Alice McGill, and recorded on an accompanying CD or audio cassette. This work represents the full circle of poetry, from its roots in oral literature to the current technology-driven movement:

Sumtimes I rocks my baby,
Sumtimes I sees him cry,
But we gon' have a good time
Way bye an' bye.
Den I rocks my baby all the time
And keep the bad things 'way
So his little eyes will laugh at me
All the live long day.

Conclusion

As Townsend (1992) observes, "The gift of seeing and feeling things afresh, as if they had never been seen or felt before, is traditionally a quality of the lyric poet; it is also a childlike quality" (p. 103). That shared capacity for perception and imagination may be the core reason why poetry for children continues to flourish and evolve through centuries of social change and transformation. From before the printing press to the present, poetry has been produced with varying degrees of literary and pedagogical success to serve a societal

need for educating children in the morals, manners, and academic priorities of the age. As society and technology have developed, the uses and expressions of poetry for children have expanded. From predominantly oral transmission in the pre-industrial era, to the written word in the age of the printing press, to sophisticated visual treatment at the turn of the 20th century and new technologic expressions in the 21st, poetry for children has encompassed forms and formats as diverse as nursery rhymes and novels, chapbooks and streaming audio.

Clearly, poetry is a powerful tool for acquiring language and other types of knowledge, in both written and oral form, as well as a rich means of expression that both entertains and inspires. As long as children need to learn, and as long as vibrant poetry is presented to them, it is likely that poetry's oral roots will take hold in children, even in the age of technology. Indeed, it appears that new ways of using technology to enhance poetry's relationship to the oral are arising. As technologies continue to change, the creative imaginations of both poet and child expand poetry's long-standing importance as an educational tool to a multifaceted—and multi-formatted—source of enrichment, delight, and discovery.

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Endnotes

1: Arbuthnot (1964) explains that the advertisement for *Mother Goose's Melody* in the January 2, 1781, *London Chronicle* comprises "considerable assurance" that the book existed, although no copies have been uncovered.

2: According to information presented by Representative Poetry Online Editors, hosted by University of Toronto Libraries at <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poet/231.html>, Moore is not the author of the poem. Don Foster, a professor at Vassar College, presents the evidence in his book *Author Unknown: On the Trail of Anonymous* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000). Foster attributes the poem to Major Henry Livingston, Jr.

3: For two nicely done examples, see Ed Young's picture book illustration of "Birches" and the spot illustration (a small drawing or graphic, usually less than a quarter-page and referring to something specific in the text) by Marcia Brown in the anthology *Sing a Song of Popcorn*.

4: For examples, see sites such as Giggle Poetry (<http://www.gigglepoetry.com>), featuring Bruce Lansky and other poets associated with Meadowbrook Press; poet Kenn Nesbitt's "poetry playground" at Poetry4Kids (<http://www.poetry4kids.com/index.php>);

Poetry Zone (<http://www.poetryzone.ndirect.co.uk/content.htm>), created by poet Roger Stevens; and publisher Scholastic's "Poetry Writing With" Web pages featuring Jack Prelutsky and Karla Kuskin.

5: Web page addresses:

<http://bostonteachnet.org/irwin/sigproj.htm>,
http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/02/lp262-04.shtml,
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/poetry/index.html>,
<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html>, and
<http://poetshouse.org/librariespitbsrc.htm>.

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