

1-1-2014

Disciplined Play: American Children's Poetry to 1920

Angela Sorby

Marquette University, angela.sorby@marquette.edu

Published version. "Disciplined Play: American Children's Poetry to 1920," in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* by Alfred Bendixen, Stephen Burt. New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2015. [Publisher link](#). © 2014 Cambridge University Press. Used with permission.

Chapter 19
Disciplined Play: American Children's
Poetry to 1920

ANGELA SORBY

"Can children's poetry matter?" When Richard Flynn posed this question in 1993, he was paraphrasing Dana Gioia's famous challenge to readers of poetry in general, but he was also upping the ante.¹ Children's poetry is often seen as a marginal subfield within the already-somewhat-marginal field of poetry. It is barely studied and barely taught, except as an instrumental teaching tool in colleges of education. And yet, ironically, nineteenth-century verses for children ("A Visit from St. Nicholas," "Mary's Lamb") are among the best-known and most culturally influential texts in American literary history. To examine the popular success of such texts, it is necessary to ask not whether children's poetry can matter but how and why it has continued to matter so much, for so long, to so many readers.

What, exactly, is children's poetry? The idea of childhood is notoriously malleable, as many historians have pointed out. In *Huck's Raft*, Steven Mintz argues that although contemporary childhood is defined by fixed stages (start school at five, drive at sixteen, etc.), pre-twentieth-century lives were "far less regularized or uniform. Unpredictability was the hallmark of growing up, even for the children of professionals and merchants."² Certainly in America, and especially before the Civil War, the line between childhood and adulthood was blurry and heavily dependent on class, race, religion, and personal circumstance. Very young children were offered alphabets and nursery rhymes, often drawn from the oral tradition. But just as older children shared adult responsibilities, so too did they share adult reading materials; this is evident, for instance, in the proliferating "household" editions of poets such as Lydia Sigourney and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The idea of household or mixed-age readership had a profound influence on pre-twentieth-century American poets, from Sigourney to Emily Dickinson to Paul Laurence Dunbar. It is necessary to understand children's literature and children's reading, not because it was a separate sphere but because it was so

thoroughly integrated into the commercial and literary life of pre-twentieth-century America. In other words, it may be deceptive to say that children read adult poetry or vice versa; instead, one could argue that most pre-twentieth-century popular poetry was not age graded; it was instead intergenerational in ways that affected its composition, circulation, and horizons of interpretation.

In early Puritan communities, older children read poems written for a broad readership, such as Michael Wigglesworth's spine-tingling "Day of Doom" (1662), which much later would serve as a model for Clement Clark Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (1823). However, Puritans were also among the first to produce rhymes aimed at young children, because they believed that they must learn to read as soon as possible to gain direct access to biblical salvation. Beginning readers were given rhymed, illustrated alphabets such as those in the *New England Primer*. Indeed, the *Primer* alphabet, beginning "In Adam's fall / We sinn'd all," is probably one of the earliest English-language American poems, although its precise origins are murky. The Boston-based printer Benjamin Harris likely derived the first *New England Primer* (1686) from an ABC book, *The Protestant Tutor*, which he had published in England in 1679. Although the *Primer* was the most widely distributed American-authored book throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, few editions survive, not because they were unpopular but because they were overused; even Emily Dickinson scissored her copy to pieces when she wanted to illustrate her verses with woodcuts.

As a poem, the *Primer's* alphabet evolved, like folk material, in response to changing cultural conditions. For instance, as Clifton Johnson notes, the rhyme for K ("King Charles the good, / No Man of blood") became, by the later eighteenth century, "Queens and Kings / Are gaudy things."³ Patricia Crain's *The Story of A* describes how the *Primer* contributed to the "alphabetization" of America: "The verbal and visual tropes that surround the alphabet cloak the fact that the unit of textual meaning—the letter—lacks meaning itself. The alphabet represents a threat to orthodoxy, for into this space competing meanings may rush."⁴ Although the image/text combination of the alphabet is theologically Calvinist, it also draws on competing discourses, from tavern signs to Renaissance emblems to nursery rhymes. Moreover, unlike the *Bay Psalm Book*, with its strict hymnal meter, the *Primer's* prosody is ragged and changeable, without a uniform meter to make the letters cohere. Ironically, the hybrid *New England Primer* is aesthetically compelling precisely because it fails at orthodoxy; it reflects, as Crain notes, an emerging mercantile economy in which flexibility is key.

Beyond the *Primer*, few influential American children's poems appeared in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, although the rapidly expanding printing trade flooded the market with tiny children's chapbooks that were hawked as toys. Poems in such volumes were often nursery or street rhymes (*Tommy Thumb's Song-Book*; *Melodies of Mother Goose*), copied from John Newbery and other Britons. Such secular materials supplemented soberer works like the *Primer*, initiating tensions between oral and written texts, and between didacticism and entertainment, that would enliven children's poetry through the nineteenth century and beyond.

American children's poetry, like American literature more generally, took on distinctive characteristics after about 1820, as more work was written and published (as opposed to pirated) by Americans. The reasons for this are manifold: the demand for consumer goods rose; holiday traditions were codified; magazines and newspapers proliferated; romantic and sentimental discourses venerated childhood; middle-class mothers had the leisure to be readers and even writers of poetry; and public schools became common and eventually mandatory. Social and material conditions favored the circulation of sentimental or didactic poems that could be read aloud, memorized, and repeated by children in the company of adults.

Clement Clark Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (1823) was the earliest secular children's poem to achieve mass-cultural popularity, and it is a bit of an outlier: its author was not a professional writer, and it is neither sentimental nor didactic, although it does lend itself to oral reading. Moore, an academic specializing in Hebrew, drew on Dutch folklore (including Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York*) to write perhaps the most famous opening couplet in American history: "'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house / Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse."⁵ In *The Battle for Christmas*, Stephen Nissenbaum argues that Moore's poem draws on, and contributes to, an invented tradition only tangentially related to its European sources. Nissenbaum suggests that "A Visit from St. Nicholas" adjudicates between carnivalesque working-class Christmas bacchanals and the more staid traditions of upper-class New Yorkers. St. Nicholas himself is transformed from a patrician bishop to a "pedlar / just opening his pack," but as a benevolent elf he sheds the illicit connotations of itinerancy and works to contain class tensions that elites like Moore found threatening.

Although Nissenbaum's analysis is meticulous, it is perhaps too localized to account for the poem's uncannily wide circulation. Structurally, the work parallels Wigglesworth's "Day of Doom," while offering domestic, materialistic pleasures in place of the old Puritan apocalypse. Moore's jarringly secular

vision of Christmas is thus couched in a reassuringly established frame; like much successful popular culture, it makes something new feel natural. The poem was first published in the (Troy, New York) *Sentinel* in 1823 but was widely copied in other newspapers. In 1848 it made its *début* as a stand-alone picture book, with woodcuts by Theodore Boyd; at this point, it was explicitly identified as “a present for good little boys and girls.” Indeed, gift-giving practices (rather than the containment of class tensions) seem key to this poem’s popularity: it both celebrates gifts and can also serve as a gift. In the poem, as at Christmastime, gifts from an adult authority to a child stress the intergenerational bonds that poems can build, and that are central to sentimental domestic ideology. In *Revolution and the Word*, Cathy Davidson emphasizes that “every work of art operates both within a market economy and a gift economy,” and even when readers buy books, they experience them, to some degree, as gifts.⁶ Although Davidson is arguing for the importance of the novel, a poem like “A Visit from St. Nicholas” proves her point even more directly, because poems (like St. Nicholas in his sleigh) are remarkably mobile and were often packaged as giftbooks. And indeed, if memorized, they did not even require a print text in order to be transmitted from household to household.

The gradual shift from church-based to home-based holidays also spurred the popularity of Lydia Maria Child’s “The New-England Boy’s Song About Thanksgiving Day,” which first appeared in Child’s commercial giftbook *Flowers for Children*, in 1844:

Over the river and through the wood
 To grandfather’s house we go;
 The horse knows the way,
 To carry the sleigh
 Through the white and drifted snow. (OB, p. 38)

Like “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” “The New-England Boy’s Song” is ultimately about consuming desires: “Hooray for the fun! / Is the pudding done? / Hooray for the pumpkin pie!” (OB, p. 39). In both poems, desires are framed as fulfilled in domestic space; the whole thrust of “The New-England Boy’s Song” emphasizes that the sleigh should rush as quickly as possible toward the gratifications of the warm house and kitchen. As versions of Child’s poem were reprinted very widely in giftbooks and school readers, stanzas and phrases appeared and disappeared, mimicking the dynamic of an oral tradition. This is one quality specific to children’s poetry, seen much less often in elite “adult” poems: the verses tend not to be stable or sacralized, but rather open to playful modification as they are repeated in daily life. For example, *The*

Mary Dawson Game Book (1916) proposes a game of “Hooray for the Pumpkin Pie!” that uses Child’s poem as a jumping-off point.⁷ Not surprisingly, given the powerful cult of domestic motherhood, “grandfather’s house” gradually became “grandmother’s house,” and by the mid-twentieth century this matriarchal substitution seems to have become the dominant variant.

The household unit was also celebrated in the output of the so-called sentimental women poets, whose work has been recovered in the late twentieth century by scholars including Paula Bennett, Cheryl Walker, Elizabeth Petrino, and Karen Kilcup. Because recovery work is aimed at taking women writers seriously – and because children’s literature is often *not* taken seriously – the intergenerational quality of this oeuvre has generally been downplayed so that other qualities, such as subversiveness or eroticism, can be highlighted. And yet, nineteenth-century women poets, including Lydia Sigourney, Hannah Flagg Gould, Emily Dickinson, Lucy Larcom, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Sarah Piatt, and most others, published volumes that mix juvenile and adult work indiscriminately, making these categories themselves seem irrelevant or inadequate. For instance, in *Select Poems* (1841), Lydia Sigourney juxtaposes “Birthday Verses to a Little Girl” with “Farewell to the Aged,” as if to stress – in typically market-savvy Sigourney style – the range of her reach. This very fluidity of voice and of audience is a productive force within the poems and within nineteenth-century poetry writ large.

Hannah Flagg Gould was probably the most prolific antebellum producer of poems aimed partly (although not exclusively) at children. One poem, “The Child’s Address to the Kentucky Mummy,” seems to muse on the issue of audience:

And now, Mistress Mummy, since thus you’ve been found
 By the world, that has long done without you,
 In your snug little hiding-place far under ground –
 Be pleased to speak out, as we gather around,
 And let us hear something about you!

The child puzzles over the mummy and her history, finally concluding:

Say, whose was the ear that could hear with delight
 The musical trinket found nigh you?
 And who had the eye that was pleased with the sight
 Of this form (whose queer face might be brown, red or white,)
 Tricked out in the jewels kept by you?⁸

Janet Gray’s recent close reading of Gould’s poem supports a thesis about veiled abolitionism, but Gray’s observations can also work as a comment on the tensions within nineteenth-century children’s verse:

Adopting the persona of a child boldly trying to initiate a public discussion, she looks back at an estranged version of herself – a woman buried with a musical instrument, an oral performer from an alien culture – and exposes the incoherence of her relationship with her audience. . . . A figure over six feet tall folded into fetal position, the mummy would have conveyed to viewers both largeness and smallness, the forms of adult and child bound together in death’s imitation of birth.⁹

Just as the adult and child are bound together in “The Child’s Address,” so too are “the forms of adult and child bound together” in Gould’s *Poems*, generating fertile instances of heteroglossia as she code-switches between younger and older voices.

The practice of addressing adults and children together in volumes of poetry spanned the whole nineteenth century, although it was slightly more common during the antebellum period. Most scholarly work on the childlike qualities of women authors stresses that, although the voice seems innocent, it is “really” an adult voice making an adult point. In her groundbreaking introduction to *The Palace-Burner*, Paula Bennett underscores the seriousness of Sarah Piatt, a mid- to late nineteenth-century writer: “Very much like Fanny Osgood and Emily Dickinson . . . Piatt uses ‘naïve’ speakers to make ‘sensitive’ adult points.”¹⁰ Bennett’s emphasis on Piatt’s fundamental adulthood makes sense in the context of a twenty-first-century critical environment that continues to marginalize children’s literature; after all, Bennett is rescuing Piatt from the margins. However, a close reading of Piatt suggests that her engagement with childhood is not a strategic mask but is in fact integral to her literary agenda and to her voice. Like many other poets of the era, if she is not merely a children’s poet, she is just as assuredly not simply a poet for adults. “Trumpet-Flowers,” for instance, appeared in the family paper the *Youth’s Companion* in 1883:

They light the green dusk with their fire-like glow,
And the brown barefoot boys laugh out below.
The wind wakes in the grass and climbs the tree,
The wind – ah, what a trumpeter is he:
He blows them in the leaves above my head
So low, so long, that he might wake the dead.
He blows them, till a child they cannot see
Hears them, and plays with that brown company. (PB, p. 111)

This poem is free of the entertainment-versus-didacticism battle that dogs some nineteenth-century children’s verse, because it aspires to be neither

funny nor preachy. Instead, it uses its own playfulness, and the playfulness of the “barefoot boys” (a trope that would be familiar to readers of Whittier) to meditate on the relationship between death and play: Can the dead awaken? Are children closer to the spirit world? The poem does not answer its own questions, except by imagining that a child who can be neither seen nor heard might be stirred from death by the trumpet flowers. Piatt, at her best, neither excludes children nor condescends to them, and in “Trumpet-Flowers” children are aligned with the wind that climbs a tree (like a child) and that acts as the animating agent of the poem.

Emily Dickinson’s child voice has generated discussion about the extent to which she can or should be read as a children’s poet – again, partly because twenty-first-century readers are used to drawing boundaries around children’s literature. Elizabeth Philips, for instance, notes that “Some of the poems, about trifles and ‘little things,’ suggest that Dickinson, like Swift, Twain, and a number of women contemporary with her, had an interest in writing for children as well as adults.”¹¹ Philips believes that Dickinson’s juvenile verse is “not always among the best poetry she wrote,” and that it only sometimes rises to the level of “superior light verse.”¹² The trouble, here, is one of genre: What is an “adult” poem? Must it exclude the child’s perspective? Must it eschew playfulness? Or is adulthood in poetry simply a matter of complexity? And if so, what counts as a trifle or little thing? The few poems that Dickinson published in her lifetime appeared mostly in intergenerational venues, like the *Springfield Republican*, that routinely published poems for a child/adult mixed readership. And posthumously, although some of her work appeared in the *Atlantic*, it was also deemed appropriate for the *Youth’s Companion*. A case can be made that Dickinson’s power derives in part from her intergenerational voice and the tensions it produces, and that this intergenerational perspective pervades many if not most of her poems. Paul Crumbley, for instance, advances a subtle analysis in *Inflections of the Pen*, arguing that “I’m Ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs” “demonstrates that the child’s voice must be thought of in dialogue with other voices. To hear the child is also to hear the voices that instruct, curse, comfort, and punish an innocent, unformed consciousness.”¹³ In other words, the discursive condition of intergenerational dialogue saturates Dickinson’s poems, just as the poems themselves were “addressed” (literally, in letters) to correspondents of all ages, and just as they continue to address adults and children today – like Piatt, without condescension.

The male Fireside or Schoolroom Poets, most prominently Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier, achieved iconic celebrity status in ways that would have been unthinkable for women poets. Ultimately,

however, they too functioned as intergenerational poets, and much of their fame rested on their ubiquity in schoolrooms. As I argue in *Schoolroom Poets*, the growth of a public education system based on rote recitation meant that virtually all children educated in the United States learned the same popular canon of poems, including, for instance, Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life," "The Village Blacksmith," and "Paul Revere's Ride" and Whittier's "Barefoot Boy." Children learned these poems in school, and adults recalled them with nostalgia. Like popular songs, schoolroom poems became repositories of personal memories even as they also served to bind schoolchildren into imagined communities:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere;
On the eighteenth of April in seventy-five,
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year. (OB, p. 45)

All children, in this poem, are posited as Longfellow's children, gathered close enough to hear his voice even as they are widely dispersed across the nation. Public school classrooms often displayed busts or portraits of Longfellow beside George Washington, cementing the nationalist aims of public school educators. Especially in their dotage, Longfellow and Whittier were hailed, in countless articles, as children's poets and above all as children's paternal friends. Both increasingly addressed themselves directly to this constituency, and when Whittier edited a commercial volume of *Child-Life: Poetry* (1871), Longfellow and the other Fireside Poets featured prominently.

Within an ambiguously intergenerational milieu, anthologies helpfully identify what literary qualities – including frankness, humor, and colloquial speech – were considered childlike. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "A Fable," for instance, appeared in *Child-Life* and in many other children's anthologies:

The mountain and the squirrel
Had a quarrel;
And the former called the latter "Little Prig."
Bun replied,
"You are doubtless very big;
But all sorts of things and weather
Must be taken in together,
To make up a year
And a sphere.
And I think it no disgrace
To occupy my place.

Disciplined Play

If I'm not so large as you,
You are not so small as I,
And not half so spry.
I'll not deny you make
A very pretty squirrel track;
Talents differ; all is well and wisely put;
If I cannot carry forests on my back,
Neither can you crack a nut." (OB, p. 39)

In his 1872 study *Americanisms*, Maximillian DeVere notes that “Bun” is New England slang for “squirrel.”¹⁴ Although Emerson pushed for American colloquialisms – stumps and boasts – in his essay “The Poet” (1840), his own verse often resorts to elite literary language. The squirrel’s boasting brings “A Fable” closer to the oral tradition than most of Emerson’s work, making it a popular children’s recitation piece. Moreover, its humor and colloquialisms also bring it closer to Emerson’s own stated literary ideals, suggesting that perhaps intergenerational audiences helped nudge American poetry away from archaism and artifice.

Child-Life was meant for household use, but the most influential disseminators of poetry – not just children’s poetry but any poetry – throughout the nineteenth century were school anthologies, particularly the McGuffey’s Reader series. These graded American schoolbooks, beginning with the *Primer* and ending with the *Sixth Reader*, draw as often from the annals of adult poetry as from the archive of specifically children’s verse, again establishing crossover hits that were quickly naturalized as part of a popular intergenerational canon that “everyone” supposedly knew. A list of McGuffey’s selections includes most of the poems now understood to be nineteenth-century children’s classics, including, for example, Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride,” Celia Thaxter’s “The Sandpiper,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” and Bryant’s “Lines to a Waterfowl.” It also includes memorable poems by less remembered authors, such as Sarah Roberts’s “The Voice of the Grass,” which pre-dates Whitman’s grass:

Here I come, creeping, creeping everywhere;
By the dusty roadside,
On the sunny hillside,
Close by the noisy brook,
In every shady nook,
I come creeping, creeping everywhere.¹⁵

As “The Voice of the Grass” (and the flocks of ravens, sandpipers, and waterfowl) suggests, McGuffey’s reigning aesthetic was overwhelmingly pastoral,

reflecting romantic assumptions about youth and nature that steered the course of much children's poetry throughout the nineteenth century.

If a handful of textbook poems were frequently repeated in schools and parlors, American magazines and newspapers took the opposite tack, trumpeting new poems in every issue. Antebellum American children's magazines that published poems aimed specifically at young readers included, inter alia, the *Juvenile Miscellany* (edited by Lydia Maria Child and later Sarah Josepha Hale), *Parley's Magazine* (edited by Samuel Goodrich), the *Fireside Miscellany* (edited by Hannah Flagg Gould and Darius Mead), the *Southern Rose Bud* (edited by Caroline Gilman), and many others, although adult magazines, such as *Godey's*, also published children's verses. This list of editors reads as a who's who of children's poetry – perhaps in part because the editors were compelled to fill gaps with poems they wrote themselves.

The most famous children's poem to emerge from antebellum magazine culture was Sarah Josepha Hale's "Mary's Lamb," which, with its fleece "white as snow," remains so familiar that it barely needs quoting. "Mary's Lamb" first appeared in the *Juvenile Miscellany* in 1830, when Lydia Maria Child was still the editor. It was widely reprinted in newspapers, and its fame was cemented when McGuffey's included it in the 1836 *First Reader*, ensuring that it was among the very first poems that young children memorized. Elsewhere, I have read "Mary's Lamb" as an animal rights poem, because kindness to animals was a constant refrain in children's magazines, reflecting a sentimental/political imaginary that aligned children, animals, slaves, and women. However, and perhaps even more importantly, "Mary's Lamb" registers Hale's strong commitment to female education. Mary, after all, takes her lamb to school, and although this violates pedagogical norms, it results in a useful lesson:

"What makes the lamb love Mary so?"
 The little children cry;
 "Oh, Mary loves the lamb you know,"
 The teacher did reply.
 "And you each gentle animal
 In confidence may bind,
 And make it follow at your call,
 If you are only kind." (OB, p. 19)

Without Mary's female influence, the school would be a more orderly but less gentle place. As Mary Kelly put it in her classic study of literary domesticity, many antebellum women asked that women be educated, not because they were like men but "because they set 'a purer, higher, more excellent example,' as Sarah Josepha Hale told the readers of the *American Ladies Magazine*

in 1835.”¹⁶ As a girl venturing into the public sphere of the public schoolroom, Hale’s Mary is precisely such an exemplar: “purer, higher, and more excellent” because of her feminine capacity for empathy. Indeed, Mary represents the ideology of many antebellum children’s poems (by poets of both sexes), which were steeped in the politics and sensibilities of sentimental culture.

After the Civil War, children’s poetry became relatively less concerned with useful lessons and more concerned with sales. This trend was energized by the expanding fields of age-graded commercial marketing, nature study, illustration and photography, “nonsense” literature, and folklore studies. Although intergenerational poetry was still being written, it was increasingly rivaled by poetry and giftbooks aimed at specific demographics. The circulation and influence of children’s magazines, particularly *Youth’s Companion* and *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*, grew, but so did the market for individual books, particularly at Christmastime. Poetry for children became less didactic and more ludic as play came to be seen as both a marketable commodity and a developmentally productive activity. In contrast to most antebellum texts, children’s poetry of the post–Civil War era increasingly explores, and even fetishizes, the material culture(s) of childhood. Toys and dolls take center stage and literally come alive, as in “The Duel” by the hugely popular poet Eugene Field. “The Duel” begins:

The gingham dog and the calico cat
 Side by side on the mantle sat;
 ’Twas half-past twelve and – what do you think?
 Nor one nor t’other had slept a wink!
 The old Dutch clock and the Chinese plate
 Appeared to know as sure as fate
 There was going to be a terrible spat.
 (*I wasn’t there; I simply state*
What was told to me by the Chinese plate!) (OB, p. 161)

This uneasy scene, with its mix of imperial imports and homespun animals, plays (like many Field poems) with boundaries: between the bought and the made, between objects and people, between children and adults. There is no moral at the end of the poem; instead, the two stuffed animals simply devour each other in an entertaining example of consuming appetites run amok.

As a counterweight to Gilded Age consumerism, some educators promoted “nature study” as a way for youngsters to escape the effects of industrialization. This dovetailed with the work of women regionalist writers (Celia Thaxter, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and others) who – when they wrote children’s poems – tended to focus on the flora and fauna of

their environs. Most nature-study poetry is reverent, encouraging close observation, as in Clara Doty Bates's poem "Grass Gypsies," about spiders:

Why, here is a camp in the wayside grass!
 Let's look at the tents before we pass.
 Beaded with dew is every one –
 Ah, 'tis only webs the spiders have spun.¹⁷

Discussing this poem, the *Kindergarten-Primary Magazine* suggested that it be taught as children observe real spiders through a microscope, and, more generally, nature poems were recruited to teach scientific observation skills.

Because children's poetry was so market driven, however, it is deceptive to link poets too closely with specific styles: Eugene Field wrote material culture poems, but he also wrote poems derived from folklore and anachronistic sentimental-mourning poems. Clara Doty Bates wrote nature-study poems, but she also churned out faux fairy-tale epics. And Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was neither regionalist nor scientific in her treatment of the ostrich:

The ostrich is a silly bird,
 With scarcely any mind.
 He often runs so very fast,
 He leaves himself behind.
 And when he gets there, he has to stand
 And hang about all night,
 Without a blessed thing to do
 Until he comes in sight. (OB, p. 173)

The vastly expanding children's marketplace of the later nineteenth century sparked a kind of stylistic anarchy: poets wrote what children would read, or what their parents would buy, rather than focusing on developing a unified voice.

The market, combined with emerging print technologies, also spurred new text/image combinations. Illustrated rhymes had been a staple in children's poetry since the woodcuts in the *New England Primer*, but after the Civil War, illustrators began to make art central to children's poetry – paving the way for twentieth-century comic strips and picture books. For instance, Peter Newell's *Topsy and Turvys* (1893) depends on pictures and rhymes that reinforce one another. Accompanied by an illustration of an African horned animal, one verse begins, "The koodoo stays alone and dreams of loved ones far away"; then line 2, printed upside down, concludes: "The Seal invites two lovely snakes to come and spend the day."¹⁸ The koodoo's horns have turned into snakes, and his head is now a seal's. Like the duck/rabbit illusion

described at length by Newell's exact contemporary, the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow (and later appropriated by Wittgenstein), Newell's verse/picture combinations play on the ways that language puts pressure on visual perception.

Newell saw his illustrations and his physical books as extensions of his verses; registering one of several patents for oddly shaped books, he wrote:

I, Peter S. Newell of Leonia, in the State of New Jersey, have invented certain new and useful Improvements in Illustrated Books and Pamphlets. . . . As such books have been heretofore made it has been usual to form or shape them in rectangular configuration, with the result that no, or but little, variety in the form of the books could be obtained, and the constant uniformity of such books in such forms, fails to meet the desire for change and variety which is strong in many persons, especially in children and young people.¹⁹

The Slant Book is thus a parallelogram, down which a child's runaway go-cart can careen, accompanied by anarchic verses as the cart hits an oompah band, an egg peddler, and even a policeman: "But down the go-cart swiftly sped / And smashed that cop completely / And as he sailed o'er Bobby's head / Bob snipped a button, neatly!"²⁰

The Slant Book also reflects a newly irreverent or even subversive tone in children's poetry – suddenly, after the Civil War, books and magazines were full of bad boys and even the odd bad girl. Naughtiness was a gold mine, and a number of poet/illustrators cashed in, creating serial works like Palmer Cox's *Brownies* and Gelett Burgess's *Goops*. The *Goops* series was a mass-cultural phenomenon that poked fun at conduct manuals. The *Goops* had a long run: they appeared first in Burgess's San Francisco-based magazine, the *Lark*, and then in the *Burgess Nonsense Book* (1901), in *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*, and as a stand-alone series of books, the latest of which was released in 1951, five decades after the original. *Goops and How to Be Them* (1900) bills itself as "A Manual for Polite Infants Inculcating many Juvenile Virtues both by Precept and Example, with 90 illustrations." The *Goops* are grotesquely baby-faced characters who wreak havoc in poem after poem:

The *Goops* they lick their fingers,
And the *Goops*, they lick their knives;
They spill their broth on the tablecloth,
Oh! They lead disgusting lives.²¹

The *Goops*' "sins" are always secular, and their punishments progressive: they are sent to bed, not to hell. Burgess's didacticism is self-reflexive: it is present, but it is also ironic.

Burgess's most viral contribution to American poetry, "The Purple Cow," appeared in the first issue of the *Lark*, in 1895: "I never saw a purple cow / I never hope to see one . . ." (*OB*, p. 209). The *Lark* was the locus of a new American interest in nonsense. Other practitioners included Oliver Hereford, Carolyn Wells, and Laura Richards. Wells, in the introduction to her groundbreaking *Nonsense Anthology* (1902), attempts a taxonomy of nonsense: it is not just silly or meaningless verse but a specifically "pure" kind of absurd poetry, practiced most perfectly by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. To be nonsense, she argues, language must not be teleological; it must have no purpose apart from its own play. In Wells's opinion, no American rose to the standards of Lear and Carroll, although she and her contemporaries made forays into nonsense. Laura Richards, for instance, seems to both mark and parody imperial expansion in "Harriet Hutch":

Harriet Hutch, her conduct was such,
Her uncle remarked it would conquer the Dutch.
She boiled her bonnet, and she breakfasted on it,
Then she rode to the moon on her grandmother's crutch!
(Oh, she rode to the moon, yes she rode to the moon, and she rode to the
moon on her grandmother's crutch.)²²

However, "Harriet Hutch," like "The Purple Cow," is more broadly humorous than properly absurd. Both Richards and Burgess place their "nonsensical" characters in commonsense contexts, rather than in the anarchic parallel linguistic universe of, say, "Jabberwocky."

If the age of American pragmatism did not lend itself to nonsense, it did support the emerging disciplines of ethnography and folklore, and many of the most powerful nineteenth-century children's poems draw on these discourses. For instance, Olive A. Wadsworth's work is mostly mired in nineteenth-century conventions (*Heavenward Bound: Words of Help for Young Christians*), but she had one bona fide hit when she transcribed and standardized a southern Appalachian counting-out rhyme:

Over in the meadow
In the sand, in the sun
Lived an old mother toadie
And her little toadie one.
"Wink!" said the mother,
"I wink!" said the one,
So they winked and they blinked
In the sand, in the sun.

Disciplined Play

Over in the meadow
Where the stream runs blue
Lived an old mother fish
And her little fishes two.
“Swim!” said the mother,
“We swim!” said the two,
So they swam and they leapt
Where the stream runs blue.²³

This poem is full of unadorned action, eschewing the arch romanticism of so much nineteenth-century nature writing. Number ten is a mother spider (“‘Spin!’ Said the mother / ‘We spin!’ said the ten . . .”), and the rhyme implicitly encourages children to use their fingers or toes to keep track. Thus it not only mimics an oral tradition but also invites, through its infectious rhymes, readers to speak the poem aloud and to perpetuate the tradition.

The American ethnographic imagination also inspired dialect humorists, such as Will Carleton, Artemis Ward, and Whitcomb Riley, who performed their work on live tours. Riley, in particular, embraced the cult of the child while appealing to intergenerational crowds. His most famous poem, “Little Orphant Annie,” recounts the arrival of a spooky native informant into a Hoosier household:

Little Orphant Annie’s come to our house to stay,
An’ wash the cups and saucers up, an’ brush the crumbs away.
An’ shoo the chickens off the porch, an’ dust the hearth, an’ sweep,
An’ make the fire, an’ bake the bread, an’ earn her board-an’-keep;
An’ all us other children, when the supper things is done,
We set around the kitchen fire an’ has the mostest fun
A-list’nin’ to the witch tales ’at Annie tells about,
An’ the Gobble-uns ’at gits you
 Ef you
 Don’t
 Watch
 Out!²⁴

Like much dialect literature, “Little Orphant Annie” marks the authenticity of the story by ventriloquizing a lower-class regional speaker. Riley articulates this reality effect more plainly in a prose defense of dialectal literature for children, which concludes, “All other real people are getting into literature: and without some real children along will they not soon be getting lonesome, too?” To “sound real,” to Riley, is to speak in dialect.

Riley also understood children's speech to be its own dialect, as in "The Bear Story," which has a three-year-old speaker:

W'y, wunst they wuz a Little Boy went out
 In the woods to shoot a Bear. So, he went out
 'Way in the grea'-big woods – he did. – An' he
 Wuz goin' along – an' goin' along, you know,
 An' purty soon he heerd somepin' go "Wooh!" –
 Ist thataway – "Woo-oo!" An' he wuz *skeered*,
 He wuz. An' so he runned an' clumbed a tree –
 A grea'-big tree, he did, – a sicka-more tree. (CR, p. 179)

In some ways, "The Bear Story" tips Riley's political hand by showing the ways that children were bundled together with regional others such as African Americans, "Hoosiers," and Irish immigrants. The child is charming, but his speech also makes him an "other" whose cuteness stems partly from his cultural and linguistic incompetence. This bundling is also evident in the burgeoning toy industry, which made heavy use of ethnic types, especially Native Americans and African Americans, on the assumption that they were childlike and comical.

Riley's friend and admirer Paul Laurence Dunbar worked within and against dialectal conventions. His many poems for children (and their parents) perpetuated oral, intergenerational traditions but also raised issues of representation and "reality" that were heightened by American racial politics. As Kate Capshaw Smith has noted, Dunbar's use of dialect was criticized by some Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, but he inspired affectionate readings and performances in ordinary African American communities. Thus Arna Bontemps recalls his own childhood circa 1910:

The name of Paul Laurence Dunbar was in every sense a household word in the black communities around Los Angeles when I was growing up there. It was not, however, a bookish word. It was a spoken word. And in those days it was associated with recitations that never failed to delight when we heard them or said them at parties or on programs for the entertainment of church-folks and their guests.²⁵

Dunbar, then, did not just depict an oral tradition but to some degree melted into it. For instance, as Henry Louis Gates points out, the opening lines from "Sunday Morning" ("Lias! Lias! Bless de Lawd!") became a playful way for parents to rouse children from bed.²⁶

As Dunbar and Riley were composing literary renditions of oral traditions, folklorists were documenting them directly. William Wells Newell's *Games*

and Songs of American Children (1883) is a landmark volume recording what Joseph Thomas has called the “playground” tradition of American poetry: that aspect of children’s verse that is embedded in their jump rope rhymes, their counting-out rituals, and even their taunts. Rhymes that early American chapbooks had simply transcribed were now “folklore” to be classified and compared to other national traditions. Newell’s introduction describes both his methodology and his conviction that children’s folk poetry, like other primitive arts, is disappearing: “A majority of the games of children are played with rhymed formulas, which have been handed down from generation to generation. These we have collected in part from the children themselves, in greater part from persons of mature age who remember the usages of their youth; for this collection represents an expiring custom.”²⁷ Newell hypothesizes that the most nonsensical counting-out rhymes are the oldest, which have been “corrupted” beyond recognition from European sources:

Onery, unery, ickery, a,
Hallibone, crackabone, ninery-lay,
Whisko, bango, poker my stick,
Mejoliky one leg! (Massachusetts; GS, p. 200)

Despite its antiquity, “Onery, unery” points children’s poetry in a bracing new direction: away from sentimentalism and didacticism, but also away from commercialism. It implies that the best poems are not just oral but participatory and subject to spontaneous revision. Many violate spelling or grammatical rules:

Monkey, monkey, bottle of beer,
How many monkeys are there here?
One, two, three,
You be he (she)!

(Massachusetts to Georgia; GS, p. 202)

This poem takes pleasure in the internal rhyme (“You-be-he”) and privileges play over sense. And despite Newell’s social Darwinian pessimism, playground rhymes remained among the most adaptable forms of American poetry through the twentieth century because they were enmeshed in daily-life activities such as choosing who will be “it” in a game of tag.

In *Games and Songs*, Newell focuses heavily on rhymes that originated in England and the Continent. In 1922, the African American folklorist Thomas Talley broadened the picture with his *Negro Folk Rhymes: Wise and Otherwise*. Like Newell, Talley relied mainly on adults’ recollections of their post-Civil War Southern childhoods. Along with work and dance songs, he gathered a

substantial collection of children's poems, including some that he traces to African origins, such as "Tree Frogs":

Shool! Shool! Shool!
 I rule!
 Shool! Shool! Shool!
 I rule!
 Shool! Shacker-rack.
 I shool bubba cool.
 Seller! Beller eel!
 Fust to tree'!
 Just came er bubba.
 Buska! Buska-reel!²⁸

Talley's collection owes debts to the minstrel and plantation traditions, as well as to Africa, and was seen as problematic even in the 1920s. But through Talley and other folklorists, poets such as Langston Hughes gained access to an oral heritage that was lively, flexible, and intergenerational. Hughes himself wrote poems for children, as have many – if not most – prominent twentieth-century African American poets, from Gwendolyn Brooks to Elizabeth Alexander to Kwame Dawes. Indeed, African American poets have remained attuned to the needs of young readers and of broad community audiences even as poets in general have narrowed their focus to address adults within the academy.

Early twentieth-century modernism, as epitomized by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, did not so much squelch children's poetry as banish it to a separate sphere, as evidenced by the radically different voices that Eliot uses when writing *The Waste Land* (for adults) and *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (for children). It can be argued that while twentieth-century adult poetry became increasingly invisible to readers outside the academy, American children's poetry stayed visible and audible, in the classroom, on the playground, and at home. This was due partly to its embeddedness in oral and playground traditions and partly to the lively multimedia mixes of text and image that had been pioneered by poet/illustrators like Peter Newell. As the twentieth century progressed, American poetry found a secure popular niche in the children's picture book format. Poet/illustrators such as Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and Shel Silverstein extended the Newell tradition, while author/illustrator teams such as Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd created memorable images: "In the great, green room, / there was a telephone, / and a red balloon . . ."²⁹ *Goodnight Moon* is certainly a playful lyric rather than a prose narrative – and it should not be surprising that Clement Hurd also illustrated Gertrude Stein's sole children's book, *The World Is Round*. *Goodnight Moon*, like a Gertrude Stein poem, enacts repetitive

linguistic rituals that readers are invited to share, both metaphorically and literally. It offers, through words and images, an accessible context for poetry – a way to make it part of daily life without diluting its play value. The best American children’s poetry has always worked this way, and its survival and popularity can perhaps serve as an object lesson for “adult” poets who struggle to find readers.

Children’s literature can be innovative, but it is also conservative, because adults control what is purchased – if not what is read – and are inclined to perpetuate what they themselves enjoyed as children. As new forms of poetry such as picture books emerged, old favorites like “A Visit from St. Nicholas” continued to circulate. And even today, many children know a (British Puritan) Isaac Watts prayer (“Now I lay me down to sleep . . .”) that was included in the *New England Primer*. Perhaps more than other subgenres, then, children’s poetry must be seen not as a time line in which one movement supersedes another but rather as an expanding circle of coexisting texts that are simultaneously vital, playful, and memorable.

Notes

1. Richard Flynn, “Can Children’s Poetry Matter?,” *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children’s Literature* 17:1 (June 1993), p. 37.
2. Stephen Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 75.
3. Clifton Johnson, *Old-Time Schools and School-Books* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), p. 82.
4. Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from the New England Primer to the Scarlet Letter* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 18.
5. Donald Hall (ed.), *Oxford Book of Children’s Verse in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 15. Poems in this collection will be cited as *OB*. On the role of Christmas in poetry, see Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America’s Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1997).
6. Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 72.
7. Mary Dawson, *The Mary Dawson Game Book* (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1916), p. 794.
8. Hannah Flagg Gould, *Poems* (Boston: Hilliard and Gray, 1836), vol. 2, p. 172.
9. Janet Gray, *Race and Time: American Women’s Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 88.
10. Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, ed. Paula Bernat Bennett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. xlv. Poems in this collection will be cited as *PB*.

11. Elizabeth Philips, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 159.
12. Philips, *Emily Dickinson*, p. 159.
13. Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 98.
14. Maximillian De Vere, *Americanisms* (New York: Scribner, 1872), p. 448.
15. William Holmes McGuffey (ed.), *McGuffey's Eclectic Reader*, 6 vols. (1879; Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley and Sons, 1997), vol. 6, p. 83.
16. Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. xiii.
17. Clara Doty Bates, *From Heart's Content* (Chicago: Morrill, Higgins, 1892), p. 88.
18. Peter Newell, *Topsys and Turvys* (New York: Century, 1893), n.p.
19. Peter Newell, "Illustrated Book and Pamphlet," U.S. Patent 970, 943, September 20, 1910.
20. Peter Newell, *The Slant Book* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1910), n.p.
21. Gellet Burgess, *Goops and How to Be Them* (New York: Stokes, 1900), n.p.
22. Laura Richards, *In My Nursery* (New York: Little, Brown, 1892), p. 88.
23. John Greenleaf Whittier, *Child-Life: A Collection of Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1871), pp. 51–52.
24. James Whitcomb Riley, *Child-Rhymes* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905), p. 23. Poems in this collection will be cited as CR.
25. Kate Capshaw Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 123.
26. Mark C. Carnes (ed.), *Invisible Giants: Fifty Americans Who Shaped the Nation but Missed the History Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 67.
27. William Wells Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1884), p. 1. Poems in this collection will be cited as GS.
28. Thomas Washington Talley, *Negro Folk-Rhymes: Wise and Otherwise* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 168.
29. Margaret Wise Brown, *Goodnight Moon* (New York: Harper Collins, 1947), n.p.