

Billy and winnie:
breaking the
boundaries with
rhythm, rhyme, and
repetition



**ASSIGN
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Nonsense poetry appeals to readers of all ages because it entertains the mind as well as the mouth. Drawing heavily on humorous imagery, creative word plays, and fantasy, nonsense poetry typically uses strong rhyme and rhythm to build and break tension. By working within the established structure of poetry and the English language it allows the reader to enjoy the breaking of these rules and the gleeful childlike experience of thinking and imagining outside the bounds of the adult world.

The first poem is titled “ Billy Batter” and is featured on page 18 of Alligator Pie, the collection of poems written by Dennis Lee. This poem makes use of repeating rhymes and rhythms to create a solid framework within which to explore the child’s perspective on problems, problem solving, and emotional states which accompany dealing with loss. Breaking the poem down into stanzas makes it clear to see the way in which it is structured. The first two stanzas closely repeat one another and the third stanza breaks this pattern and provides resolution. The first stanza is eight lines long and can be further divided into groups of lines consisting of three, then two, and then three lines again. This pattern is echoed in the second stanza. The rhyme scheme is A, A, B, C, C, B, B, B. The emphasis being on the last mono-rhyme of the word “ dad” which is repeated three times. Along with the word “ dad” there is the repetition of the phrase “ a dragon ran off with my dad”. This fantasy image of a dragon stealing his father is juxtaposed against the much more realistic problem of a lost cat. Here Lee takes an everyday event that is common in childhood, parallels an impossible event beside it, and connect the two with the word “ And”. Both of these are what is causing Billy Batter to feel “ so sad” but the emphasis is on the loss of his father. However, there

is a sense of humor to the situation because it is portrayed as fantasy not reality. The first three lines also work as a group in that they are structured in a call and response style and also feature a repeating rhythm of trochee. The response changes rhythm with the fourth line being in iamb and the rest of the lines being mostly in anapest with a double stress on the words " my dad" which stand alone in line seven. The second stanza is a repetition of the first replacing the word " dad" for " mum" and the incident of losing the cat with ripping jeans. Again, another believable situation is coupled with an unbelievable one and both are reasons for Billy to feel " glum". The anapest rhythm further emphasizes the word " my mum" and there is the downbeat on the first syllable of " monster" giving it more weight. So, at this point there are four problems which need solving and the third stanza resolves all of them in a childlike fantasy way.

As Lee has already created strong repeating patterns of rhyme and rhythm, when he breaks them in the third stanza they become more noticeable signaling the change in emotions and the solving of the problems. The first three lines keep the same trochee rhythm but there is a significant change in the words used. The rhyme of " Batter" and " better" has a different feel than " Batter and " matter" with the change in the vowel sound and the addition of the consonance " Billy Batter...better". There is also a change in the rhyme scheme with the addition of two extra couplets which turns the rhyming couplets into a list of four instead of two in the previous stanzas. Lee adds the Canadian city of " Saskatchewan" to his poem giving it a specific place that children can imagine a dragon being banished to thus adding more humor and fantasy to the writing. The four scenarios use the

same rhythm of iamb and anapest which gives a sense of ease and completion. In the end all is resolved and most importantly the parents “came back”. Interestingly the “monster” falls down a “wishing” well and this is a clue that the child has wished away the monster. This is a magical element and appeals to children’s sense of power which counteracts their normally powerless position especially in the case of losing one’s parent. The dragon and the monster can be interpreted as new people who have started relationships with the parent and are seen by the child to be taking his parent away. In the world of a child small things can be big so by grouping them together Lee not only creates a visual picture of the imaginative world of the child which is full of monsters and dragons but he also connects the small losses of a cat and clothing to the large ones of the loss of parents and family. What was lost has been found, the father is returned, what was ripped has been repaired, the mother is returned. This is a poem about damage and loss. The break-up of the family and the child’s desire to fix the problems. Lee uses the style of nonsense with its strong rhymes and rhythms, and fantasy imagery, to tap into the child’s view of the world.

The second poem in this analysis is titled “Anxious Pooh Song” and is featured on pages 150-51 of the book *Winnie-the-Pooh* written by A. A. Milne. This playful thirty-eight line poem employs a call and response structure that asks silly questions to which the answers are obvious. It circles around telling a short narrative using the strong prosodic elements of rhyme and rhythm typically found in nonsense poems and children’s nursery rhymes. Although the rhyme and rhythm schemes appear simple at first, they are both quite complex and are used to build tension, quickly break and release

it, then using circling and repetition, start rebuilding it again. There is a conversational tone between the speaker and the listener, however, both of them are in Pooh's own mind and this adds humor to the poem while at the same time reinforcing the characterization of Pooh as innocently quirky and a bit muddled. Although the original poem is without stanza breaks, for analysis it is helpful to work with groups of lines which fit with a conversational pace as well groupings for the rhyming scheme and use of repetition. The first group is made up of six lines which all have an end mono-rhyme, " Pooh" " who" " do" " knew", and is then unexpectedly broken on the last line, by the word " wetting" creating the unusual pattern of A, A, A, A, A, B. This break suddenly releases the tension which had been building and it creates space for the second group of twelve lines which begin by echoing the first three lines of the first group. In terms of rhythm, these first three lines of both groups, are all iamb. This effect puts the emphasis on the words " Cheers", " Pooh", " who" in the first grouping, and " Cheers", " Bear", " where" in the second grouping. These iamb lines are followed by a combination of iamb and anapest, finishing with a strong down beat and an exaggerated " tt" sound in " wetting". This break in the rhyme and rhythm pattern signals the end of the grouping and the answer to the question of " what did he do".

The second grouping starts with the same repeating rhyme of C, C, C, and it keeps the same rhythm of iamb, however it changes the next rhyme scheme into couplets. The couplet D, D, of " swim" and " him", then " who" and " do", followed by a triplet of " Pooh", " who", " Pooh" and finishing with the word " forgetting", repeats the original rhyme scheme of A, A, A, A, A, B. This

repetition of the mono-rhyme from in the first grouping, brings the poem in a circle creating a sensation of completion or release after a long building up of tension. Rhythmically the second group starts with iamb for the first four lines and breaks this pattern with an anapest in line five. It moves back and forth from iamb to anapest which gives the poem a lilting and skipping along movement. The iamb drum like regularity is broken by the anapest addition in each line. The last line in this group finishes with a heavy doubled down beat on the final word “ forgetting” lending much more weight to the word as well as emphasizing the concept of Pooh as a bit confused and the humor of his being muddled. Moving into the third grouping, the rhythm and rhyme scheme becomes more complicated at the same time that the narrative is finishing. This grouping uses the rhyme scheme E, E, F, F, F, G, G, F, F, employing couplets and a triplet and completes with an alternating rhyme of H, I, H, I. Whereas the first two groupings had relied on iamb rhythm, this third grouping switches to a primarily anapest, or a combination of anapest and iamb, rhythms which gives this part of the poem a chaotic and rushing feeling in comparison with the steadiness of the lines which were solely iamb. The fourth and last grouping starts with same words as the first three lines of the first and second groupings. It also returns to the simple steady iamb rhythm and the simple triplet rhyme scheme of A, A, A, C, C, C. This repetition creates the feeling of having come full circle. The last two lines finish with a cheerful anapest rhythm and A, A rhyme scheme which again adds to the feeling of completion. This completed feeling of resolution however is broken by the very last line which asks the same question, “ what did he do?”. This question which began the poem adds the final touch of

humor because as it brings the reader full circle it also speaks of forgetting, being muddled or confused, and the hopelessness of explanations.

This poem and the feelings it invokes reflects the narrative of the book. In chapter ten, Christopher Robin is throwing a party for Pooh, to which Owl responds with the question " you are, are you?"(p. 147). He explains to Owl that " it's to be a special sort of party, because it's because of what Pooh did when he did what he did to save Piglet from the flood" to which Owl responds with another question " Oh, that's what it's for, is it?"(p. 149). This statement and questioning response is followed by yet another. Christopher makes the statement " Yes, so will you tell Pooh as quickly as you can, and all the others , because it will be tomorrow" and Owl replies" ' Oh, it will, will it?' Said Owl, still being as helpful as possible" (p. 149). This small conversation explains the subject of the poem, how it will be structured, as well as the humor being that the questions are not " helpful" at all. Lastly the humor is also created by the understanding that it is anxious Pooh's " muddled" mind as he worries that nobody will know what the party is for and that nothing will go right. The poem has a playful and happy tone as it starts, and finishes, with " 3 cheers for Pooh". Although the poem does make use of the mono-rhyme scheme it's monotony is broken up by a rolling rhythm which moves back and forth between iamb and anapest as well as a variation in line length and rhyme scheme changing between couplets and triplets as well as the quick and unexpected end rhyme changes. The humor comes from questioning the obvious, the upbeat and cheerful nature of the subject, as well as the use of sheer repetition. By using strong prosodic devices these poems beg to be spoken aloud to let the mouth and ear play,

explore, and experience the physical sensations and patterns of sounds that the words create.

Nonsense poetry is not just about the use of made up words, such as “walkamus” and “talkamus”, although this is often used, it is only one of the many elements at work in this style of literature. In the two poems analyzed the nonsensical elements were created by the combination of the conventional with the absurd, the heavy use of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, as well as the use of humor, which created a poem that appeals to the child by being entertaining and at the same time by expressing a childlike perspective of the adult world.

Works Cited

Lee, Dennis Alligator Pie, published by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto 2012

Milne, A. A. Winnie-the-Pooh Dutton Children’s Books, New York, NY 1988