"Tell Me a Poem"

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"Tell Me a Poem" . . .

By Lorraine Sandstrom
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Children Delight in Rhythm

Of all the questions asked of the nursery school teachers at Iowa State College, those regarding poetry are perhaps the least adequately answered. This may be due to the fact that nobody has done enough work with poetry to justify giving any kind of opinion regarding it. Most of these questions concern poetry books and sources of good poems. One parent asked, "Are there certain poems which fit a certain age?" and "When do you first give poetry to a child?" Others ask, "What is the best time of day to give poetry?" and "Of what value is poetry to a child?" Perhaps it is not actually impossible to help parents a little, if we tell of the things which we actually have done in the nursery school.

Knowing that little children both think and construct, we assume that they have a power of appreciation for art and literature far beyond that for which we ordinarily give them credit. Here, then, we have a learning individual, someone so alert that he will spontaneously grasp and make use of immediate opportunities. For this reason exposure to the best poetry is a very important step. The child takes in and makes a part of him the environment in which he moves. The teacher pours her own gifts of natural talent and experience into the very air he walks, so that he can feel and breathe the rhythmical words of a beautiful poem.

Sound is more important than meaning. For this reason rhythm must be right. When flawless rhythm is combined with beauty and sincerity a perfect little poem may result. For instance, do you ever think of beauty and romance when you hear "Ride a Cock Horse?" We are sure the children do, because we have seen little boys sparkle at the thrill of riding a horse to Bannbury Cross. And what do you find at Bannbury Cross after you get there?

"To see a fine lady Upon a white horse With rings on her fingers And bells on her toes She will have music Wherever she goes,"

And isn’t there humor in it, too? Just think how delightfully funny a lovely lady would look with bells on her toes! The children like her, anyway. Perhaps it is because of the music she will always have wherever she goes. Can’t you feel the rhythm, the slight jingliness and the touch of romance in it?

Mother Goose’s contribution to the children’s world of poetry is great. Many educators have really interviewed children, if it can be called that, to find whether or not they admit they prefer Mother Goose. In many cases there is an upsetting contention that children do not like Mother Goose. They think her silly and out-of-date. On the other hand, some educators have mixed Mother Goose jingles with other poems which are considered very good and have given them to children at a very young age so that they could choose from several selections those which they liked best. In this kind of test actually made at the St. Louis Public Library, the children were found to favor Mother Goose so thoroughly that it was decided that she is from cover to cover the most satisfactory of them all.

It is interesting how many people are making accusations that much of Mother Goose is harmful. They have said she teaches cruelty, bad grammar and selfishness. Still others, on the contrary, have said she teaches history and good deeds. At any rate, we have discovered that most of Mother Goose’s quaint verses we have chosen to use with our groups of 2 and 3 year olds have proved very successful. That is, providing their joyfulness and "Tell-it-again" responses are a measuring stick of success.

It is quite impossible to tell when a child will call for a poem. It is equally as hard to know when to give poetry if there is no asking for it. But chances are that if he does not ask for poetry it is because he has not heard enough of it. Those of you who have not worked with little children cannot know the thrill which comes when a child spontaneously bursts out with, "Tell me a poem." One child asked me to "Sing the stories from the poem book." We do sing many of them. "Hey Diddle Diddle," "Humpty Dumpty," "Little Miss Muffet," and many others have been set to music which is perfectly charming and rhythmical. There seems to be genuine simplicity in all these songs and verses. Think of this, for instance: "Who am I? I’m little jumping Joan, When nobody is with me, I’m all alone."

Everyone says that small children prefer commonplace experiences of everyday life. This is true. They want realistic stories about things in their own little world and are not at all interested in others. The smaller they are the more ego. The following lines best of all typify this fact about them:

"I see the moon and the moon sees me, God bless the moon and God bless me!"

On the other hand, there is no reason why the small child should not have the privilege of letting us appeal to his imagination. We do it in Mother Goose when we give this one:

"There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, She had so many children she didn’t know what to do, So she gave them some soup without any bread And spanked them all and sent them to bed."

Fortunately, we find our selves in appealing to fairies, and surely the children do, too, or they wouldn’t seem so fascinated by them. Children love to imagine things. They really do know how to distinguish between fact and fancy, but that is no signal that they want to. Separating fact and fancy makes things less interesting. Who wouldn’t want to step and explain a fairy to a little child! Wouldn’t you rather agree with the child poet who said, "I don’t see fairies; I dream them." Once a child asked us point blank, "Do you ever see any fairies?" I answered, "I see so many fairies when I choose to look I know there are a million more than live in any book."

Perhaps no other poet has really given us more delightful fairy verse than Rose Fyleman. She must believe in fairies herself or she couldn’t make them so much fun for children. And then she cautions us about them:

"If you meet a fairy, remember what I said, Speak to her mildly, lest she run away.

It has been difficult (Continued on p. 15)
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to find fairy poems which are very short. Since brevity is necessary in poetry for the pre-school child, we ourselves have tried to make some very short poems which tell about the fairies. For example:

"'Tis funny how you never see
A fairy plain as plain can be,
A fairy always wants to hide
So 'in between' or 'way inside.'"

Another one which strikes a humorous note in children is: "Lettuce Sandwiches."

"I found a funny fairy
About the size of me
Eating lettuce sandwiches
Happy as could be
I asked him why he smiled so wide
And this is what he said
This lettuce doesn't think I know
It's hiding in the bread."

Stevenson gave children more than just a rhyme. He gave them sincerity and something he himself felt. A. A. Milne is doing that today in poems like:

CHRISTOPHER ROBIN

"Christopher Robin goes hoppety hoppety Hoppety hoppety hop
Whenever I tell him politely to stop it
He says he can't possibly stop
For if he stopped hopping, he couldn't go anywhere
Poor little Christopher, couldn't go anywhere
And that's why he always goes
Hoppety, hoppety, Hoppety hoppety hop."

As we said before, very short poetry of six or eight lines is by far the most popular with little children. They like to have it accompany the piece of work they are doing at the moment. If, for instance, the child is learning to dress himself, and he hears:

"Though you are three and a wee little elf,
I know you can do this all by yourself!"

that dressing job becomes much easier.

Mary Ann was getting bored with having to hang up her coat every time she took it off. The nursery school teacher said:

"I'm much too big for a fairy,
And much too small for a man,
But this is true,
That whatever I do
I do it the best I can."

Mary Ann liked it, soon learned it and was not only hanging up her own coat but also other children's coats after that.

With one little boy who was tired of putting on his mittens, the teacher said:

"Although you may know it
I wouldn't quite dare
To say I can do this
But I can—so there."

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He looked rather surprised, but his mitten's came on, and he danced around, with both hands in the air, singing and shouting, "So there, so there."

The nursery school teachers like to meet the child's spontaneous interests with as much outside material of educational value as possible. Besides the material equipment, pets, boxes, machinery parts and other things which we often bring in, there are of course the songs and poems. Some days the child enjoys birds and talks about them the entire morning. In this case the teacher tries to have at the tip of her tongue and fingers enough information about birds as possible. There are charming poems about birds and this one is a good example:

"A birdie cocked his little head
Winked his eye at me and said
Say, are you a pussy willer
Or just a kitty caterpillar?"

One could go on endlessly giving all the charming poetry we find about birds, animals, Christmas, the seasons, stars, tea parties, and the fairies, until we discovered that there are poems about nearly everything a child would wish to learn. Some of the poets of the present day who have contributed to this glorious anthology are Milne, Rose Fyleman, Herbert Asquith, Elizabeth Prentiss, Hilda Conking, James S. Tippett, Eleanor Farjean, Walter de la Mare and many others. At the nursery school we find Milne overwhelmingly popular. And why shouldn't he be when he can write such things as this:

IN THE FASHION
A lion has a tail and a very fine tail, And so has an elephant, and so has a whale, And so has a crocodile, and so has a quail— They've all got tails but me.

If I had a sixpence I would buy one; I'd say to the shopman, "Let me try one;" I'd say to the elephant, "This is my one;" They'd all come round to see.

Then I'd say to the lion, "Why you've got a tail And so has the elephant, and so has the whale! And look! There's a crocodile! He's got a tail! You've all got tails like me.

Yes, we do feel that it is possible to give very little children poetry in such a manner that they will thoroughly enjoy and want it. This sharing of choice poetry helps them to gain and develop more of an understanding of it so that they can have appreciation.

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