Children’s Literature Unit 1

**The Songs of Infancy: Lullabies and Nursery Rhymes**

**Introduction**

My first experience with language, other than the conversations going on around me, were the songs sung to me by my mother. I can still hear the sound of my mother’s voice singing those simple songs as I fell asleep. For many of us, these songs are some of our earliest memories.

Lullabies, nursery rhymes, popular songs, and play songs are often a child’s first experience of language, and these simple pieces of lyrical poetry, often set to music, can stay with us for a lifetime. In this unit we will:

* consider the form and function of poetic language
* look at some examples of the literature of infancy
* reflect on how babies may be affected by the poetry of nursery rhymes

**Poetic Language**

Poetry is defined in the Oxford Companion to the English Language as “literary composition in verse form.” Poetry is not language used in its “normal” way. Rather, it is “special” language, consciously composed and read with the understanding that it sacrifices realism for the sake of beauty and complex symbolic meanings. In addition to being composed in verses, or “lines,” traditional poetry is usually composed using a variety of literary patterns, forms, and figures including:

1. Poetic Form: The shape or sound of a poem is most strongly influenced by two factors:
   1. Meter: “a pattern of regular pulses and their arrangement” usually described as “feet” in poetic analysis. Similar to a time signature in musical notation, the number of “feet per line” are dictated by the number of stresses syllables in a line.
   2. Rhyme: a repetition of similar or identical sounds in the final stressed syllable of two or more words. Often, but not always, these words will be at the end of a line of poetry (“end rhyme’). There are many different types of rhymes and rhyming patterns, or “schemes.”
2. Poetic Language: Words are often connected to each other using repeated sounds. These connections can add meaning or simply make it more beautiful or memorable by adding musical effects.
   1. Assonance: Repeated vowel sounds within a poem. (Ex. The r**ai**n in Sp**ai**n stays m**ai**nly in the pl**ai**n.”)
   2. Consonance: Repeated consonant sounds in words with different vowel sounds, usually within a line of a poem and often in neighboring words. (Ex. “a **f**ew **f**igs **f**ell to the **f**loor”)
   3. Onomatopoeia: A word that sounds like what it describes. (Ex. “tick-tock” sounds like the ticking of a clock; “meow” is similar to the sound a cat makes; “bang!” sounds like an explosion)
3. Poetic Meaning: Words are used in ways that create connections between ideas and layers of meaning, inviting the reader to look at language and experience in new ways.
   1. Metaphor: A figure of speech that directly refers to one thing my mentioning another thing. The two parts of a metaphor are the tenor and the vehicle. (Ex.: “The classroom was a zoo.” In this metaphor “classroom” is the tenor, the object that is being described as having the qualities or characteristics of a “zoo,” which is the vehicle. Metaphor can take many forms, including:
      * 1. Metonymy: When a thing or idea is referred to by the name of some object with which it is closely associated. (Ex: Using “the crown” or “the throne” to refer to a king or queen.)
        2. Simile: A comparison between two unlike things, using “like” or “as.” (Ex. “Life is like a box of chocolates.” Or “He was as busy as a bee.”)
        3. Hyperbole: The use of exaggeration for emphasis or effect. (Ex. “I told you a million times to clean your room!”)
   2. Symbolism: A symbol is a word or image that is understood by a culture to represent an idea, object, or relationship. The two parts of a symbol are the signifier and the signified. One example is an image of a heart. When you see a heart, you automatically think “love.” Another is the colors of traffic lights. There is no reason why red should mean “stop” or green “go” other than the fact that we have all agreed that this is what those colors mean.
   3. Personification: Giving human characteristics and emotions to non-human “characters.”

**Nursery Rhymes**

A nursery rhyme is a traditional poem or song for children. The first collection of nursery rhymes to be published was Mother Goose’s Melody, published by Thomas Carnan, the stepson of John Newberry, in 1765. Sometimes lullabies, songs intended to soothe a child to sleep, are included within the genre.

The language of many nursery rhymes is shockingly violent when read critically. Many include severe injury or death in very graphic manners: babies falling from trees (“Rock-a-bye Baby”), decapitation (“Oranges and Lemons”), sexual assault (“Georgie Porgy”), animals being cooked alive (Sing a Song of Sixpence”). In addition, many nursery rhymes refer to historical people or events which were often infamous examples of cruelty or injustice.

Many nursery rhymes can be sung and have traditional melodies that are found across cultures, often using the same music with different words. Most traditional nursery rhymes come from the oral tradition and have no known author.

**Selected Nursery Rhymes**

1. **“Roses are Red”**

Roses are red,

Violets are blue,

Sugar is sweet,

And so are you.

2. **“Ring Around the Rosie”**

Ring around the rosie,

A pocket full of posies;

Ashes, ashes,

We all fall down.

3. **“Rain Rain Go Away”**

Rain, rain, go away,

Come again some other day.

Little Johnny wants to play,

Rain, rain, go away.

4. **“Baa, Baa, Black Sheep”**

Baa, baa, black sheep,  
Have you any wool?  
Yes, sir, yes, sir,  
Three bags full;  
One for the master,  
And one for the dame,  
And none for the little boy  
Who lives down the lane.

5. **“It’s Raining, It’s Pouring”**

It’s raining, it’s pouring,

The old man is snoring.

He bumped his head,

When he went to bed,

And couldn’t get up in the

morning.

6. **“Little Jack Horner”**

Little Jack Horner

Sat in a corner

Eating his Christmas pie;

He put in his thumb,

And pulled out a plum,

And said, “What a good boy am I.”

7. **“Jack and Jill”**

Jack and Jill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water;

Jack fell down and broke his

crown,

And Jill came tumbling after.

8. **“Little Miss Muffet”**

Little Miss Muffet

Sat on a tuffet,

Eating her curds and whey;

Along came a spider,

Who sat down beside her,

And frightened Miss Muffet

away.

9. **“This Little Pig”**

This little pig went to market,

This little pig stayed home,

This little pig had roast beef,

This little pig had none,

And this little pig cried,

“Wee-wee-wee!”

All the way home.

10. **“One, Two, Buckle My Shoe”**

One, two, buckle my shoe,

Three, four, shut the door,

Five, six, pick up sticks.

Seven, eight, lay them straight.

Nine, ten, a big fat hen.

11. **“Star Light, Star Bright”**

Star light, star bright,

First star I see tonight,

I wish I may, I wish I might,

Have the wish I wish tonight.

12. **“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”**

Twinkle, twinkle little star,

How I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high,

Like a diamond in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle little star.

How I wonder what you are.

13. **“Hickory, Dickory, Dock”**

Hickory, dickory, dock,

The mouse ran up the clock.

The clock struck one,

The mouse ran down,

Hickory, dickory, dock.

14. **“Little Bo Peep”**

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep,

And can’t tell where to find them;

Leave them alone, and they’ll come

home,

Wagging their tails behind them.

15. **“Little Boy Blue”**

Little Boy Blue,

Come blow your horn,

The sheep’s in the meadow,

The cow’s in the corn;

But where is the boy

Who looks after the sheep?

He’s under a haystack,

Fast asleep.

16. **“Humpty Dumpty”**

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king’s horses,

And all the king’s men,

Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

17. **“Three Blind Mice”**

Three blind mice,

Three blind mice,

See how they run,

See how they run,

They all ran after the farmer’s wife,

Who cut off their tail with a carving-

knife;

Did you ever see such fun in your life

As three blind mice?