

Teaching Sense through Nonsense with Winnie the Pooh

Picture this: a round yellow bear, with very little brains covers himself in mud, to look like a rain cloud. Then he uses a blue balloon, to match the sky, so he can float up to the top of a honey tree to steal honey from some bees. You may recognize this picture as a Winnie the Pooh story from the book, *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A.A. Milne. Children love Winnie the Pooh stories, like the one described above. But most parents and teachers consider stories like Winnie the Pooh only useful for entertainment purposes. Reading for entertainment is a great skill for children to learn early on, because it builds in them the value of learning. Parents and teachers may decide to choose other books for children to enjoy which still teach them something. For instance, *The Story of Snow: The Science of Winter's Wonder* by Mark Cassino is written in a story format while teaching children about the world around them, specifically the science of snow. What many parents and teachers don't realize is that *Winnie-the-Pooh* has the ability to teach children about their world in the same way. *Winnie-the-Pooh* falls under the genre of fiction, but more important to note is its sub-genre of nonsense literature. It, and other books of its kind, have merit for more than their entertainment value. Although many consider nonsense literature to be purely for entertainment purposes, when used in stories like A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, it is valuable to learners because it not only helps children grasp the concept of language, but teaches them how to sift out the sense from the nonsense.

As explained in *Nonsense Literature for Children*, "Nonsense is not the absence of sense but a clever subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning. The very

notion of topsy-turvy implies that there is a right side up,” (Anderson and Apseloff 5).

Nonsense literature is commonly found in verse, but is also apparent in prose. Authors who write in the form of nonsense use a number of literary techniques to do so.

Juxtaposition is a helpful tool to call attention to pairs that don't really fit together. A narrator that only states the facts is often employed to put some realism into the nonsense. To keep the nonsense from reigning too heavily and causing the story to lose meaning, authors make use of heavy rhyme or meter or other forms of verse. It is common in nonsense literature for inanimate objects to have the ability to think and feel. This is an effective tool for children, who relate with the notion of personifying objects. Nonsense is also frequently found through faulty cause and effect scenarios. These are useful literary techniques, but what do they do to help teach children about language and the world around them?

A.A. Milne makes use of many nonsense techniques in his Winnie-the-Pooh stories. Through these he teaches children sense and language. Take his use of rhyme and verse for instance. The Winnie-the-Pooh stories are not written entirely in verse, but Milne makes use of verse to help teach language skills. In the story described at the start of this paper, Pooh sings a little song while he is floating up by the bees: “How sweet to be a Cloud/Floating in the Blue!/Every little cloud/*Always* sings aloud,” (*World of Pooh* 20). It's a silly rhyme and doesn't make an overwhelming amount of sense. No one can *be* a cloud, and have you ever heard a cloud sing? But the rhyme of cloud, cloud, and aloud promotes memorization and repetition. It's short and easy to remember. There is no music written with it in the story and yet it's supposed to be a song. This

gives the reader the freedom to concoct their own tune which will aid in memory. All these elements are needed for rote learning or learning through memorization and repetition. “Intellectual development in children is heavily dependent on the acquisition through rote learning. Nonsense literature provides the inspiration to use words in an innovative way...” (Anderson and Apseloff 99).

There are several similar songs that characters sing throughout Winnie-the-Pooh that are written in verse but Milne also uses rhyme in his prose, “‘That’s funny,’ he thought. ‘I know I had a jar of honey there. A full jar, full of honey right up to the top, and it had HUNNY written on it, so that I should know it was honey. That’s very funny,’” (*World of Pooh* 62). When read aloud the rhyme of honey and funny almost takes on a sing-song sound. It does the same thing that the actual song did above by encouraging rote learning. By starting out with words and rhymes that don’t have a complicated meaning, children are able to play around with sounds and learn how to put words together. Kids are able to learn through experience by experimenting with words and sounds. By not having to worry about the meaning making strict sense, they can focus on the words themselves, how those words connect with seemingly random black symbols on a page, and how to decipher and use the symbols to read and write. Much nonsense literature focuses on sound over sense. It spells words phonetically instead of how they’re actually spelled. It takes a liberty with words to give children the freedom to learn to use them in their own way.

Milne uses more than just rhyme to help teach language skills such as, the juxtaposition of misspelled words, and words spelled correctly as in the quote above. In one sentence

Milne spells honey correctly and incorrectly as, 'hunny'. This can help a young reader understand that things aren't always spelled the way they sound. It gives them the chance to compare the word with the correct and incorrect spelling. Milne does this often when dealing with the character, Owl. In one instance, Pooh goes to Owl to get him to write 'A Happy Birthday' on a honey pot for Eeyore's birthday. Owl agrees, "So Owl wrote...and this is what he wrote: HIPY PAPY BTHUTHDTH THUTHDA BTHUTHDY," (*World of Pooh* 79). Owl's concoction is obviously gibberish, but humorous gibberish. The juxtaposition can help a child understand the humor from the reality as well as the correct use of letters from the incorrect.

Milne also uses made up words to teach language. "Because every Heffalump that he counted was making straight for a pot of Pooh's honey, *and eating it all*," (*World of Pooh* 63). The illustration next to this line about the Heffalump is of an elephant eating Pooh's honey. Since the illustration offers sense in the nonsense, a child reading this story can focus on the word heffalump, and play around with sounds to make sense of words in general. Children learn sounds and speech before they learn to read. It's something they're familiar with. By taking that familiarity, authors who write in nonsense literature teach children about words and language in a way they are already comfortable with.

The Hundred Acre Wood is a nonsense world that helps a child reader distinguish real from imaginary. Milne creates this nonsense world through a mixture of nonsense ramblings, faulty cause and effect, a matter-of-fact narrator and personification. *In Which Pooh Goes Visiting and Gets into a Tight Place*, Pooh eats too much at Rabbit's house and then gets stuck trying to get out of Rabbit's front door. His

back half remains in Rabbit's house and his front half is outside. Rabbit becomes so flustered at the situation that he goes off on a tangent of nonsense rambling, "...and pointed out that, when once Pooh was pushed back, he was back, and of course nobody was more glad to see Pooh than *he* was, still there it was, some lived in trees and some lived underground and---" (*World of Pooh* 32). Rabbit's ramblings don't make much sense. A child reader can easily understand this to be a comic situation and use it to relate back to his own life. This sort of nonsense rambling can help a child reader to distinguish between comic and serious situations in everyday life. "Nonsense literature uses the spirit of playfulness to rearrange the familiar world. It thereby reveals that the rules we live by are not inevitable, nor do they exist on a purely objective plane and apart from human intentions," (Anderson and Apseloff 94). Every time a nonsense story takes a step away from real and normal, a child is better able to understand what real and normal is. In the same way that a person can appreciate the light only by experiencing darkness, a child can understand the sense of the world by experiencing the nonsense. By its very nature, nonsense gives permission to break the rules, make up things that aren't possible, spout words that don't mean anything and through that exploration, children can determine the actual from the imaginary.

In the same story, Christopher Robin decides that the only way to get Pooh out of Rabbit's door is to wait a week for Pooh to get skinny again. This is an example of faulty cause and effect which is ever present in nonsense literature. In reality, just as Pooh couldn't have gotten fat from eating too much in one sitting, he also cannot lose enough weight in a week to become unstuck. This faulty cause and effect is just another

element of nonsense to guide children to understand the real from the abstract. Children live in a very adult world full of things that they don't have the prior experience to understand. Nonsense literature puts that adult world into silly understandable concepts to help children make sense of the world they're living in.

All the Winnie-the-Pooh stories are told by a narrator. In the beginning of the book, the reader learns that the narrator is Christopher Robin's father. Although the stories are full of nonsensical elements, the narrator's voice behind the stories offers a matter of fact point of view to keep the nonsense from getting too out of control, "and Pooh said, 'Yes.' Because it was," (*World of Pooh* 62). The narrator's insertion of: "Because it was" is a very matter of fact way of verifying Pooh's "Yes." His matter-of-fact statements like this throughout the story provide the sense in a nonsense story and gives the child reader something to refer back to so they don't get lost in the nonsensical elements.

The reader also learns early on that Winnie the Pooh and all his friends in the Hundred Acre Wood are actually stuffed animals. By stating this fact at the beginning, Milne introduces personification, another element of nonsense. All the characters are really full of fluff and yet they can move and think all on their own. Every so often Milne will even reference the fact that they're not real. At one point Eeyore says, "They haven't got Brains, any of them, only grey fluff that's blown into their heads by mistake..." (*The Pooh Story Book* 20). So not only does Milne personify inanimate objects, he frequently reminds the reader that they are, in fact, inanimate. By doing this he brings imagination to the table which helps the child reader understand what it means to pretend. It gives sense to the nonsense.

While, some stories like *The Story of Snow: The Science of Winter's Wonder* are written specifically to teach children about a particular aspect of the world around them, nonsense stories, like those found in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, offer a more complete lesson of the world as a whole. Parents and teachers shouldn't discount the learning value from nonsense literature. Through techniques like rhyme and verse, children are able to experiment and capture difficult parts of language, speaking and reading. With other techniques like faulty cause and effect and personification, nonsense helps children decipher what is real and what is not. It helps them make sense of the adult world they are living in and learn how cope with things that might not make much sense. Instead of offering one particular lesson, nonsense literature gives children the power and confidence to discover the difference between nonsense and reality in the world around them.

Works Cited

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