

The Weirdness of Shel Silverstein

Author: Ruth K. MacDonald

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[(essay date 1986-1987) *In the following essay, MacDonald discusses the commercial and popular success of Silverstein's books of poetry for children.*]

Poetry for children has long been one of the great unexplored areas in children's literature. Few reputations, either by poets or by critics, have been built on it, since most acclaim and notice goes to novels. What criticism exists derives from the "beauties" school--pointing out the beauties, the excellences of this poet, that line. The reasons for this neglect are two-fold: the American population's general distaste for poetry, except for the most simple rhyme, resulting from the second reason, the way poetry is introduced to children in school. Poetry has for some time had to be "taught" to children: presented in a pedagogical, systematic way, with emphasis on the literary and didactic values in the poems. In fact, since Isaac Watts, children's poetry has been, in the main, designed to preach. Most children, and adults as well, realize that the poetry they were introduced to as school children was designed to propagandize them in manners and values predominantly Protestant and puritanical; in fact, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, the didactic mode of children's poetry was the only justification that most educational theorists could find for presenting poetry to children. The entertainment value, if any, was clearly and distantly secondary. Poetry had "spinach" value--good for you, but with little appeal to the palate.

In the late twentieth century, the situation has improved somewhat. If anything has changed in children's poetry, it is the voice of the poet in addressing the presumably juvenile audience. No longer willing to present poems primarily designed to teach, contemporary poets strive to find a voice that does not condescend, but rather invites the child, as an equal of the poet, to join in a poetic moment. For all that this is an innovation, as X. J.

Kennedy and Dorothy Kennedy note, old-fashioned patterns of rhythm, rhyme, and sound dominate even the most contemporary of children's poetry. It is as if "shaken only a little by those winds of change that in the 1960s and 1970s swept the mainland of American literature, poetry for children today seems an offshore island doing its best to stay serene" with poetic devices clearly antiquated in poetry for adults (75).

Perhaps this resignation to traditional poetic forms is due in part to those qualities which the research shows that children most prefer in poetry. Two studies, one a survey of the research, the other a survey of actual children, show that those qualities children like best in their poetry are identifiable rhythm, rhyme, and sound patterns. But even more telling than the devices used in the poems is the tone of the poems. The overwhelming preference, among actual children and as reported of children in the research, is for humor in poems (Terry 20; Fisher and Terry 223).

The only contemporary children's poet to have made a reputation on a large scale and predominantly as a humorist is Shel Silverstein. His two volumes, ***A Light in the Attic*** and ***Where the Sidewalk Ends***, succeed where other volumes have failed: that is, on the best-seller lists; in franchises of bookstores such as B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, where only those volumes which have consistently good sales occupy shelfspace for any length of time; and in public and school libraries, where other volumes of poetry for children gather dust. The commercial success of these two volumes is not due to impulsive purchases by children; with a price tag beyond \$10, the books exceed most children's disposable income. It is a truism in children's literature that for a book to succeed beyond library reputation, adults must buy it, and it must have some appeal to adults--something beyond a child's nagging plea--in order to motivate them to buy it. Beyond his work as a cartoonist in *Playboy*, Silverstein is a little-known artist. And clearly his connection with *Playboy* does little to recommend him to an adult purchasing a book for a child, given the conservative, moralistic bent of adult American attitudes toward what children should read. If the *Playboy* connection ever becomes widely known, sales of Silverstein books will undoubtedly skyrocket, as censors seek to ban the books from both library and bookstore shelves and both children and adults snap up copies to find out what's so objectionable.

So what is it about Silverstein's books that make them a commercial success? The first possibility to be eliminated must be the literary excellence of his

poetry. Rarely venturing into the uncharted territories of free verse or blank verse except when narrating a story in near-prose form, and seldom stumbling into novel vocabulary, a Silverstein poem remains unalterably committed to traditional language, rhyme, meter, and stanzaic formats. Even with this dedication to older poetic forms, Silverstein shows himself as a less-than-perfect craftsman. His rhymes are frequently imperfect, and he frequently makes easy work for himself by rhyming *-ing* and *-tion* words. Sometimes *-ing* words lose their terminal *g*, so that other words ending in *-in'* can be inserted for the rhyme. The rhythms are rough, sometimes scanning not at all, with no particular poetic justification. Beyond his lack of craftsmanship is the fact that most American adult readers, and juvenile readers as well, see appreciation of metrical excellence as a trait limited to teachers and scholars, as intellectual peculiarities which send elitists into aesthetic trances but generally have no appeal for the average reader.

So it is not for literary or technical excellence that Silverstein is ranked so highly among readers. My guess, confirmed by reactions of elementary classroom teachers and students, and by the slender body of criticism surrounding Silverstein's poetry, is that it is the humor, a kind that appeals to both adult buyers and child readers. Such words as "uproarious," "zany," and even the more tepid "delightful" dominate the reviews of both ***Light in the Attic*** and ***Where the Sidewalk Ends***. Among the reported favorites in the volumes are "**Sick**" (***Sidewalk*** 58-59), which John Hemphill confirmed was the most popular poem among seventy-two 4th, 5th, and 6th graders in a survey he did in Tallahassee, Florida (38-44). Also reportedly popular is the "**Boa Constrictor**" in ***Sidewalk*** (44-45), which has been sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary on a children's record. Given the lack of literary appeal and therefore literary scholarship on Silverstein's work, there are doubtless many others which are popular among children but which remain undocumented.

The range of humor in evidence in the books makes them appealing to a wide range of school-aged children. It is safe to say that the books are designed for literate children, not for the preliterate. The humor in the poems depends on being able to read them and to interpret the pictures that accompany them. An acquaintance with, though not necessarily a love of, the written word and a rudimentary ability to take the cues rendered in the pictures make the poems inaccessible to children as yet unable to read and to interpret the illustrations. The poems also contain a range of humor designed to appeal to children from first to sixth grade, and to older children,

including adults, nostalgically but accurately recalling the kinds of humor that most attracted them earlier in their lives.

Though the scholarly investigation of humor is fairly recent and fraught with the difficulty of gaining serious respectability, given the propensity of the subject matter to take over the tone of the investigation, still there are developed theories of children's humor and how children acquire various senses of humor. Wolfenstein and McGhee are the foremost theorists in the field, the first a Freudian, the second still psychological, but more developmental rather than sexually analytical in approach. In spite of their divergence of perspective, both report, though for differing reasons, basically the same stages in the development of humor in the child.

The first stage, starting at a year, has less to do with the child producing humorous situations, and more to do with the child recognizing contextual clues in an interaction that indicates that the situation is "just for laughs." This expertise is developed from the child's earliest interactions with an adult or older child, especially with interpreting facial expressions as a sign of intent, so that humor, rather than fear, is the result of the interaction. Between the ages of two and three, the child sees as humorous the reversals of sex by change of name or ascription of gender. "Bobby is a girl" is hilarious to a child at this stage of development. More Freudian interpreters of the situation may see it as an aggressive unsexing of another child acquaintance, which it need not be if it's "just for laughs" and for the comic appreciation of a new point of view (Bariaud 19, 24). Slightly older children find humor in play with names, especially nicknames, which Wolfenstein finds particularly offensive to adults, as a residual of some ancient, primal instinct about the sacredness of naming (75), and which less mythic analysts may still find offensive, since Americans acquaint names with personal identity and dignity.

Children at ages four and five think that humor consists of making funny motions and faces. Their linguistic humor is reserved for the contemplation of impossibilities, sometimes based on linguistically induced possibilities: "Have you ever seen a horse fly?" (as opposed to a horsefly). Such questions do not demand an answer, as a riddle might. In fact, when Wolfenstein sought to teach children of this age riddles, they did not understand the punch lines and saw no humor (139, 147). Their own versions of funny stories were improbable and shapeless, tending toward no other particular end than an entertaining set of circumstances.

Beginning at age six, children appear to like joking riddles, both the listening to them and the telling of them. Both Wolfenstein and McGhee report the emergence, like clockwork, among six-year-olds, of the "little moron" jokes. Neither reported particularly precocious children learning these rotely memorized jokes early, nor did they see slow children learning them later. Neither did either specify the particular developmental point at which such jokes begin to appear funny to the child or begin to appear as part of the child's repertoire of humorous performances. While Wolfenstein does point to the consistent themes in the moron jokes of fear of exposure and stupidity (98, ff.), she also reports the concise verbal quality of the jokes which children feel the need to reproduce precisely (141-44). It is also a stage where the child is able to control the body long enough to keep it still during the telling of the joke (Wolfenstein 143); silly gestures are not part of such stories. Wolfenstein also reports the phenomenon that children of this age do not admit to having learned the joke from someone else, or having memorized it; they claim that they have always known it, or that it just exists (99, 123, 132). For them, it is part of the cultural unconscious that simply emerges when the time for telling them is right--this latter is my interpretation of children's sense of the eternity of such stories.

Concurrent with the appearance of the first moron jokes, the joke riddles of other kinds appear. It is important to note that the child in early grade school is dependent on rote performance of these jokes; the skill of the storyteller, the mood of the audience, the sustaining of the audience's interest are not yet matters of concern (Wolfenstein 21, 143; Bariaud 34). But the repertoire of humorous appeals expands, and it is here that Silverstein finds his youngest audience. For the child this age, Silverstein provides joke riddles, such as "**What Did?**" (*Light* 16-17)--"What did the carrot say to the wheat?" / "'Lettuce' rest, I'm feeling 'beet.'"

Memorizing a Silverstein poem can be a relatively simple experience, since some of the poems are only four lines long. The rhyme and rhythm, as well as the short attenuation of the situation until the punchline, all help the young reader/reciter remember the poem. The memorizing makes the poem no longer Silverstein's but the teller's, making it for the child reciter a part of that vast lore of childhood that simply is, without authorship. Bathroom humor, the kind that concerns not only feces and urination but also the exposure of the posterior, is a prominent feature both in children's humor at this stage and in Silverstein's books. For example, there is this short, easily

memorized poem that combines bathroom humor with a younger sibling rival as the humor's butt:

"Hat"

*Teddy said it was a hat,
So I put it on.
Now Dad is saying,
"Where the heck's
the toilet plunger gone?"*

(Sidewalk 74)

Bathroom humor appears shortly after the child learns control of his body functions; the silliness often rests in the baby-talk words that adults use to describe feces and urine. Older children of reading age still find this subject matter humorous, though they demand more complicated joke forms to relate their amusement in and fascination with this otherwise forbidden topic (Bariaud 27). Silverstein amply fills this need for jokes and riddles about bathroom behavior and exposure. While children demand the book and read it, if these volumes ever find their way into the hands of the conservative and censorious, there will be book-banning attempts. As it stands now, the illicit experience of reading these scatological poems provides fun for children at an age when the delights of reading and of poetry may still be shrouded in schoolteacher obscurantism. These are not poems for the teachable moment; they are simply to be enjoyed.

As the child's ability to tell a funny story grows with length and complication of narrative, Silverstein's poems provide the length, breadth, and variety of joking to fill most children's needs. This need stems partly from tensions that children frequently feel during their first years at school; they feel the pressure to achieve, not only from teachers but from parents as well. The "uproarious" relief that Silverstein's poems provide, if one may borrow a term from the reviewers, and the sheer volume of poems in the collections, make the Silverstein books good resources for stress reduction. For example, there are the stories about odd children, such as **"Jimmy Jet" (Sidewalk 28-29)**, who watches so much television that he turns into a TV set; the result is that he becomes the center of family attention as they sit down nightly to watch him; thus, though the poem might seem a warning about the perils of overindulgence in television, the moral, if there is one, is undercut by the attention that Jimmy gets. Pamela Purse in **"Ladies First" (Light 148-49)** finds herself being eaten by a cannibal because she insists on being first in line for

all seeming privileges. These oddballs, much like the characters in Ogden Nash's poems for children, are enough like modern children themselves and yet bizarre enough that children can both identify with them and yet hold them at arm's length long enough to laugh at their absurdities and extremities.

The subject matter of Silverstein's poems is the greatest determinant of his success with children. While he sometimes chooses subjects like the weird children cited above, the more frequent butts are parents, teachers, and the lessons they try to impose on children. The most obvious of these adult-bashing poems is **"How Not to Have to Dry the Dishes"** (*Light* 12), which suggests the way out of this onerous household chore: simply drop one. Who would trust such a clumsy child with such delicate work after such an incident?

The poem most damning of adult wisdom is **"The Little Blue Engine"** (*Sidewalk* 158), a parody of *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper (1925). Encouraging children to try hard, to accomplish in the face of intolerable odds, to do so by positive mental attitude--these virtues have attained the status of sacred doctrine in the lore of nurturing American children. Piper's book continues on nursery shelves in spite of its insipid illustrations, trite situations, and a moralizing tone of voice nearly intolerable for adult readers of any sophistication. Silverstein's title refers to the same little locomotive, who in Piper's version is also called "the little blue engine." By using the less obvious title, Silverstein manages to keep the parody less obvious to the first-time reader, though by the end of the first stanza, the line "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" signals to the reader the source of the root story.

Silverstein attenuates the suspense here the same way that Piper does--by forcing the engine up a high promontory, which takes all the engine's mental and mechanical energy to achieve the summit. But Silverstein does not allow the engine success. The last stanza shows the backsliding of the engine with cartoonlike action words: "CRASH! SMASH! BASH! / He slid down and mashed into engine hash." The minuteness of the train's remains is emphasized by the internal rhyme of the second line--a rare instance of Silverstein's exercising true craftsmanship in the service of poetic expression. In concluding the poem, the poet offers, as is so common in American literature for children, an obvious statement of an obvious moral, this one undercutting utterly the apparent truth of Piper's classic: "If the track is tough and the hill is rough, / THINKING you can just ain't enough!" Most children

recognize the veracity of this statement from the results of everyday living; the authoritative, truth-telling voice of the poet, which refuses to condescend to moralizing high and lofty sentiments, makes the statement all the more appealing to the child reader. Though some adults may be appalled at Silverstein's handling of this enshrined story, many more will appreciate his willingness to deal so summarily with the debunking of this "truth." Silverstein refuses to give the child a prettified poetic experience, as earlier, and sometimes even contemporary poets for children do when they are particularly preoccupied with aesthetic experiences. By such a refusal, Silverstein places himself in the tradition of American humor identified by Jesse Bier in *The Rise and Fall of American Humor*, the humor which debunks, by both reversal and anti-proverbialism (105).

"Little Abigail and the Beautiful Pony" (*Light* 120-21) is more obviously subversive of parental authority. The story of a little girl who dies, pining away for want of a pony, has as its literary source the stories from sermons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century, of both good and bad children who died young, to find either eternal grace or damnation. It is not clear until Silverstein's prose disclaimer at the end of the poem which Abigail is--is she one of those excessive children who deserve their dreadful ends, or is she a poor, neglected child who deserves to have her wish granted? Silverstein's parenthetical closing, "(This is a good story / To read to your folks / When they won't buy / You something you want.)" clearly addresses the child and the purpose: parental manipulation. Most children have rudimentary devices for getting what they want from their parents, but the fact that Abigail wants a pony, a common childhood wish and yet one seldom granted, and the fact that her saga is a story which can be used against parents the way they sometimes use stories to thwart children, doubles the extremity and the hilarity of Abigail's story. The picture of Abigail on her deathbed, attended by her anguished parents, with balloon comments coming out of their mouths--"Oh, If she were only alive, I would buy her a hundred a *hundred* ponies!"--gives further cues to the humor resulting from bathos which Silverstein achieves in the poem.

Other poems make fun of the lessons children learn at school, such as **"The Edge of the World"** (*Sidewalk* 89), whose picture is the illustration on the dustjacket of the volume. In spite of what children learn at school about Columbus, circumnavigation of the globe, and astronomical observation of our planet by astronauts, the evidence of their senses points to the

conclusion that the world is flat. Silverstein presents this evidence in much the same way that a teacher would--with condescending introduction: "And I can tell you, boys and girls, / The world is FLAT!" This utterance comes from a world traveller, who claims to have been to the edge of the earth and actually observed it. It is the claim not only of the explorer, but also of the storyteller, both of whom claim veracity based on sometimes dubious evidence. In either voice, Silverstein appeals to children, rather than putting them off with the preachy voice of the teacher. The picture, showing a girl, a dog, and a fire hydrant precariously placed to fall off the edge, are equally appealing and amusing. Here and elsewhere, Silverstein places himself firmly in the American tradition of the teller of tall tales, with fiction deliberately exaggerated for comic effect, undercutting the stereotypically sanctimonious voice of the teacher who may claim as truth equally outlandish statements.

As McGhee points out, as children mature and approach their teens, they are able to tolerate humor with themselves as the butt (Bariaud 34). They become storytellers themselves, able to use intonation, timing, and mood creation to develop a story sufficiently to result in a humorous punch line. Silverstein's longer poems lend themselves to such storytelling, especially the tall tales--about being late for school in "**Kidnapped!**" (*Light* 159), or about not taking out the garbage, in "**Sara Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out**" (*Sidewalk* 70-71). This willingness of older children to see their own behavior as the source of humor indicates a level of maturity, signalling the end of Silverstein's appeal. While teenagers report resurrecting old jokes that they might otherwise consider that they have outgrown (Bariaud 38), and while adults can similarly regress to the jokes of their childhoods (Wolfenstein 156), a steady barrage of humor of the level Silverstein presents does not hold attraction for these older readers the same way it does for younger readers. While adults can be convinced to buy the book for children based on their own transitory pleasures in Silverstein's jokes, children of elementary age find themselves compelled to read through for yet another entertaining session of sustained humor.

Only once does Silverstein's humor challenge the boundaries of more mature amusement, with the only poem that is even vaguely sexy, "**They've Put a Brassiere on the Camel**" (*Light* 167). "They," the unspecified villains of childhood fun and good sense, put this brassiere across the two humps so that the camel will be "decent" and "respectable." While the underwear here is explicitly connected with female sexuality, the same kind of amusement can be found in other Silverstein poems about underwear for either sex, or

the lack thereof. The root of the humor is exposure; while the camel is hardly exhibitionist when it does not have a bra, other poems about dropped pants and naked posteriors appeal to the same level of humor that the camel poem does--presexual, insecure, laughing at nudity for its own sake, with no real titillation. While the poem appears at first glance to tread on the toes of propriety, the ridiculous picture of the lingered zoo animal has no sexual appeal and would offend only the strictest of censors.

Silverstein wisely keeps the book from degenerating into a collection of simple school-aged jokes by interspersing not only a variety of lengths of poems, but also a variety of tones. Unrelenting humor is hard to sustain; Silverstein as a professional cartoonist **knew when to change gears**. For the more thoughtful side of even the young reader, there are such poems as **"Hug o' War"** (*Sidewalk* 19), a pun on the game tug o' war, which results in the pleasing but not necessarily uproarious game where "Everyone giggles / ... and everyone wins" in a marathon of good feeling. Like a conscientious objector, the child narrator announces at the beginning, "I will not play at tug o' war." While sounding suspiciously like the voice of a 1960s peace protestor, the narrator still manages to bring to the fore the alternatives to making war--in this case, a non-sexual way of making love.

More potent and deadly serious is the story of **"Generals"** (*Sidewalk* 150-51), where two generals feel obligated to hold a battle one day, rather than follow their initial impulses to play hooky from their work. The result is that they destroy each other on the battlefield, clearly demonstrating the evils and not the glories of their endeavors. Race relations, as in **"No Difference"** (*Sidewalk* 81--"We're all worth the same / When we turn off the light") and child and senior citizen neglect, as in **"The Little Boy and the Old Man"** (*Light* 95), are other concerns expressed in the volumes with particular poignancy. The most consistent, serious concern is promoting the child's own powers of creativity, to write poetry himself, to amuse himself and others, to think both seriously and humorously. Silverstein's direct, vivid expressions and obvious enjoyment of the same kinds of topics that children find humorous make these encouragements palatable; no teacher here is assigning a poem to be written, no adult is commanding children to enjoy themselves in spite of their own inclinations. The poet is simply a large child himself, capable of perhaps more complex linguistic productions than a child might be, but on the other hand, a large person still in touch with the smaller person within.

McGhee points to several positive attributes he found consistently among children who were able to produce humor for themselves and others: their language and social skills were more developed; they were more energetic; they showed more assertive tendencies in groups; and they showed more concern for, as well as ability to get for themselves, the positive regard of others (McGhee 259). At any age, a teller of humorous stories knows the pleasure of being the center of attention and hearing the laughter of listeners. Silverstein knows it, too, and manages to provide the opportunity for children to get some of this pleasure for themselves.

Hamlin Hill claims that there is unlikely to be a single humorist who will speak for the late-twentieth-century United States, because of the multiplicity of experiences and voices among a diverse people at this time (225).

Silverstein's works have yet to attain a longevity to merit such a claim for his fame, and two volumes rarely constitute a claim to a whole career of articulating the humor of an entire nation. But it may be the case that, in retrospect, Silverstein as the poet of American childhood and humorist of American child life may achieve something of that stature for the children who have already read the books. When they become adults and hand the books on to their own children and pupils, Silverstein may find even his toilet jokes hallowed.

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