A Spoonful of Silly: Examining the Relationship Between
Children’s Nonsense Verse and Critical Literacy

by

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the common assumption that nonsense literature makes “no sense.” Building off research in the fields of English and Education that suggests the intellectual value of literary nonsense, this study explores the nonsense verse of several North American children’s poets to determine if and how their play with language disrupts the colonizing agenda of children’s literature. Adopting the critical lenses of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory in its discussion of Dr. Seuss’s *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955) and *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* (1978), along with selected poems from Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974), *A Light in the Attic* (1981), *Runny Babbit* (2005), Dennis Lee’s *Alligator Pie* (1974), Nicholas Knock and Other People* (1974), and JonArno Lawson’s *Black Stars in a White Night Sky* (2006) and *Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box* (2012), this thesis examines how the foreignizing effect of nonsense verse exposes the hidden adult presence within children’s literature, reminding children that childhood is essentially an adult concept—a subjective interpretation (i.e., translation) of their lived experiences. Analyzing the way these poets’ nonsense verse deviates from cultural norms and exposes the hidden adult presence within children’s literature, this research considers the way their poetry assumes a knowledgeable implied reader, one who is capable of critically engaging with the text. Discussing the implications of this reader position, this study ends by reflecting on the potential relationship between nonsense verse and critical literacy.
Preface

Chapter 4 of this thesis was partly inspired by the undergraduate honors essay I completed at Simon Fraser University, “On Beyond Nonsense! Analyzing Nonsense as Dialect,” which was presented at the 2013 Annual American Comparative Literature Association Conference in Toronto. It is expected that parts of Chapter 5 will be presented at the Annual Children’s Literature Association Conference to be held in Ohio in 2016.
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Dedication

To Mom and Dad. Thank you for reading to me as a child and making the time to play with me. I love you both so much.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation for Research

I cannot remember the day or the time I was read my first children’s book. Nor can I list the names of all the children’s books I have read or had read to me since. Children’s literature has permeated my imagination so thoroughly that I cannot trace its impact to a single book or reading experience. And yet, I can honestly say that these stories are imprinted in my memory, each another stamp in my passport of literary travels. Unlike J.M. Barrie’s character Peter Pan, I should not like to believe that these places I have known and loved as a child, and others I have yet to explore, are no longer accessible to me now that I have matured into an adult. On the contrary, I have found myself returning to children’s literature throughout my life, and each time I do, I am amazed at the things I discover.

Indeed, these discoveries have multiplied now that I have begun to consider the genre from an academic standpoint. The more I learn about children’s literature, the more I begin to question the ideologies underlying its formation. After all, if children’s literature is defined by its intended audience (Hunt 42), as something that adults write specifically for children (Nodelman and Reimer 97), where does that leave me? I have confessed that I appreciate children’s literature, not just as ‘children’s’ literature, but as literature that possesses the complexity, insight, depth, and creativity to follow me through all stages of life. Granted, I have not passed through many, but I have known enough people who have to attest to the fact that the pleasures of children’s literature are not restricted to children. Consequently, like many scholars, I find general definitions of children’s literature to be problematic, mainly because they tend to be reductive (Nodelman, Hidden 137). They are reductive in the sense that they represent constructed notions of what it means to be a child and an adult (Nodelman and Reimer 97),
notions that limit people’s ability to exist apart from culturally fabricated understandings of childhood and adulthood.

This frustration with the oversimplification of adult and child roles is likely what led me to nonsense literature. I admit that addressing the politics of the production, dissemination, and reception of children’s literature can become its own sort of rabbit hole. Literary nonsense, however, provides a way into and out of the discussion. By considering the upside down view of the supposed ‘reality’ that we inhabit—this world of ‘adults’ and ‘children’ and their ‘respective’ literatures—we can finally gain some clarity. For as Lewis Carroll’s iconic Wonderland demonstrates, nonsense directly and indirectly forces us to ask the important questions: Who are we? What is language? How are the two related? Asking these questions in unconventional ways allows us to step outside the standard answers of our cultural institutions and the hegemonic ideologies that yell, “Off with your heads! Children are all the same! Adults and children are different! There is no need to think or question this!” Certainly, one of the greatest benefits of nonsense is that it wakes us up to the realization that ‘normal’ is an arbitrary concept that can and should be challenged.

And yet, the fact remains that nonsense, like children’s literature, is often underrated. For this reason it is not surprising that the two forms have historically been aligned. During the rise of children’s literature in the eighteenth century, nonsense became increasingly associated with conceptions of the ‘innocent’ child (Heyman and Shortsleeve 167). As one might suspect, this connection has created its own set of problematic assumptions:

Just as we routinely underestimate the resilience, independence, rebelliousness, and sexuality of a supposedly ‘innocent’ child, it is argued that critics correspondingly
underestimate the complex nature of nonsense literature. (Shortsleeve qtd. in Heyman and Shortsleeve 167)

These assumptions aside, what I find most intriguing about the connection between nonsense and children’s literature is its ability to deconstruct the boundaries of its categorization. For it is by subverting the logic that governs the classification of literature and language that nonsense essentially illuminates the ambiguities of children’s literature, thereby exposing the power dynamics at the heart of the genre.

In trying to understand the ways in which nonsense liberates readers from the misconception that children’s literature is simple and of little intellectual value, I found myself returning to theoretical concepts I came across in a course on Translation Studies, during my undergraduate degree in World Literature. In the course we discussed how translation, like reading, is an act of interpretation that implies the interaction of one’s own subjective position with another (i.e., that found in the text). When it comes to literary translations, Lawrence Venuti points out that there are two kinds of texts: foreignizing and domesticating (20-21). According to Venuti, a foreignizing text does not aim for fluency like a domesticating text does, but rather, seeks to disrupt the target readers’ experience of the text in order to remind them that it is a translation. Instead of masking the work of the translator, the text reveals clues of the act of translation—unfamiliar, foreign elements (e.g. words, ideas, syntax etc.) that point the reader back to the original source culture. Reflecting on the concept of foreignization, I found myself considering how nonsense itself might be foreignizing for readers, especially in the way it disrupts specific cultural understandings of language and childhood.

Such a concept is useful, especially considering the fact that adults often perceive children as belonging to a different culture (Opie and Opie, *Lore and Language* 2). Because
conceptions of childhood are largely based on adult understandings of its difference from adulthood, children are frequently positioned as a cultural “other” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 273-274). Accordingly, Venuti’s framework for translation proves valuable here, since discourses surrounding children’s literature tend to frame childhood as the source culture/text from which adult authors draw their inspiration. In this respect, the adult writer for children is situated as a sort of translator of children’s experiences, either his/her own, or those witnessed/imagined. Still, it is important to remember that, while adult writers do act as interpreters of childhood, they are at the same time attempting to socialize children through the stories they tell. In fact, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer go so far as to compare this act of socialization to the process of colonization (97). Adopting their postcolonial perspective and Venuti’s terminology, it does not seem unreasonable to view children’s stories as domesticating interpretations (i.e., ‘translations’) of children and childhood.

But the parallels between translation and writing for children do not end there. Just as the translator of a domesticating translation may disappear behind the “fluency” of his/her work (Venuti 4-5), so does the adult writer for children disappear behind the child personas/narrators he or she creates (Nodelman, *Hidden* 206). Where domesticating translations are concerned, the more a text conforms to cultural norms, the less visible the translator’s personal subjectivity and the more tempting it is to view the translation as equivalent to the original source text. Comparatively, the more a children’s story upholds culturally approved perceptions of childhood, the less visible the adult subjectivity of its creator. Part of creating a ‘fluent’ reading experience for children involves removing any traces of the adult writer from the text—convincing the child reader that the story is written from a child’s perspective. According to Nodelman, the aim of the reading experience is to keep the adult presence hidden, as a shadow
text or unconscious element of which the child reader is unaware. “The unconscious of a text of children’s literature,” he observes, “is the adult consciousness that makes its childlikeness meaningful and comprehensible” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 206). Invisibility then, is the goal of most (but not necessarily all) writers for children, just as it is for most translators. Invisibility allows one to mistake a text as representative of another, as accurately describing a particular culture or group of people. Invisibility allows a text to appear as an authority on the true nature of how things actually are. When it comes to children’s literature, the adult writer’s invisibility affirms adults’ understanding of the source culture (i.e., childhood), and seeks to convince children of its supposed legitimacy.

The main difference between translation and the act of writing for children is that children constitute both the source text for the adult writer, and part of his/her target audience. I say target ‘audience,’ not target ‘culture,’ because the target culture is adult society. Adults translate notions of childhood based on their own perceptions of its conceived difference from adulthood, and this is a domesticating act, for it accommodates what appears ‘foreign’ (i.e., childhood) to adult models of understanding. Indeed, for this reason some scholars state that adults do not write children’s books for children at all, but rather, for themselves—to confirm their assumptions about childhood (Zipes 63). In any case, the danger of translating these (mis)interpretations to children is that they will actually learn to accept them as fact: they will be made to “feel guilty about or downplay the significance of all aspects of themselves that inevitably don’t fit the adult model” (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Reading such literature, children will likely accept and internalize the adult assumptions that marginalize them.

All this has led me to consider whether nonsense literature, in its disruption of linguistic norms, creates a foreignizing experience for child readers, one that reminds them of the arbitrary
nature of language and the subjective presence of the adult author. In so far as it is foreignizing, nonsense potentially provides a way for children to negotiate the power structures instituted by language (including those that uphold the hierarchical structure of adult-child relations) and the hegemonic standards by which they are maintained. I am particularly interested in the foreignizing effects of nonsense verse, as it is quite plausible that the abstract mode of poetry, with its sounds, rhythms and imagery, is likely to enhance the reader’s awareness of the subjectivity invoked in the writer’s language use. The popularity of children’s nonsense poetry may in fact be a sign that, contrary to commonly held adult assumptions and current fears about the state of child literacy, children are capable of critically engaging and challenging the literature they encounter, along with its adult creators. For as Dr. Seuss so aptly observes in his last book, children are going places. Nonsense verse, it seems, might prove to be one of the best means of travel. This master’s thesis is the first step in my journey to finding out the possible routes it opens up.

1.2 Research Statement and Discussion

This thesis investigates the possibility that children’s nonsense verse subverts the colonizing efforts of children’s literature through its disruption of linguistic and cultural norms (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Such an investigation necessarily involves a critical examination of the assumptions underlying children’s literature (Heyman and Shortsleeve 167), including those that associate ‘nonsense’ with ‘children.’ By addressing the domesticating aspects of language, literary nonsense provides an effective entry point into concerns relating to the field of children’s

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1 Nicholas Carr’s The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains (2010) and Maryanne Wolf’s Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain (2007) both state concerns relating to the state of child literacy in the digital age.

2 Oh, the Places You’ll Go! (1990), was the last book published before Seuss’s death.
literature, a field that, due to its extreme commercialization and consumerism, has been described as a cultural institution that seeks to homogenize children (Zipes 41). For the purpose of this study nonsense will be positioned as its own genre (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 1), with the demarcation of ‘children’s nonsense verse’ acting as a sub-genre of the literary form. The genre of literary nonsense and its various criteria will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, the Literature Review, which provides an extensive overview of some of the key concepts and terms outlined at the end of this introduction.

Although this thesis examines children’s nonsense verse it does so with the awareness that the distinction between ‘children’s nonsense’ and ‘adult nonsense’ is by no means clear, as literary nonsense has often been associated with Romantic notions of childhood (Heyman and Shortsleeve 167; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 246-247). This association between nonsense and childhood may be due to the fact that a lot of literary nonsense is thought to have derived from nursery rhymes (Heyman and Shortsleeve 166; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 259). Further blurring the line between adult and child nonsense, however, are texts like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which appeal to young and old audiences and set the standard by which other literary nonsense is judged (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 1-3, 7). Apart from these crossover texts, there are also crossover authors, whose work is difficult to classify. These authors represent a range of talent and include writers such as T.S. Eliot, Edward Gorey, Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Shel Silverstein, Dennis Lee, and Jim Henson (Anderson and Apseloff 25). Given this wide range, it is not surprising that scholars have had difficulty reaching a consensus regarding the classifying features of literary nonsense (Anderson and Apseloff 3).

This lack of consensus aside, the number of studies on literary nonsense, and their international scope, proves that there are scholars who agree it is a subject worth discussing
Of course, it is important to note that not everyone shares this opinion (Ede, “An Introduction” 49; Saltman 64). Many people, both inside and outside the academy, disregard nonsense based on the belief that it lacks literary merit (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 1). Such prejudice provides further insight into the underlying association of nonsense with children’s literature (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 1). Like nonsense, children’s literature is often viewed as inferior and lacking in aesthetic quality (Nodelman, *Hidden* 139; Hunt 42; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 4-5; Heyman and Shortsleeve 167). Factoring these different attitudes into discussions of the genre, it is not surprising that definitions of nonsense extend from understandings of it as “pure nonsense,” to something more resembling social commentary or critique (Anderson and Apseloff 4-5; Heyman and Shortsleeve 168; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 259).

While aesthetic appreciations of its value may vary, scholars have identified some general characteristics of literary nonsense: its topsy-turvy nature (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 8; Chukovskiĭ 101), tendency to subvert meaning (Anderson and Apseloff 4-5; Saltman 64; Chukovskiĭ 99), and incongruous juxtapositions (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 59). This list is abbreviated and by no means exhaustive (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 16, 45, 258; Anderson and Apseloff 4). Augmenting these characteristics are numerous other linguistic devices (i.e., puns, parody, spoonerisms, malapropisms, onomatopoeia, neologisms, and portmanteau words) that will be discussed further in Chapter Two. The confusion surrounding definitions of nonsense has made it so that it is often mistaken for other forms (e.g. fantasy, grotesque, surrealism, parody, burlesque, satire etc.) (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 134, 257). In fact, there is debate as to whether nonsense is best classified as a mode, device, or genre (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 255). These
issues illustrate the ways in which nonsense, by its very nature, is a controversial topic that resists singular interpretations.

An important observation to make, however, is that nonsense and its devices constitute what many scholars and educators describe as ‘word play,’ an activity often engaged in by children (Geller 29, 41, 55). Educators have observed that children demonstrate creative play with the rules of language—its grammar and semantics—as they grow (Geller 41). For this reason, nonsense verse has frequently been related to discussions of language learning; the more children upset the rules of language in their play, the more they demonstrate a mastery over the very concepts they are subverting (Chukovskyi 103; Geller 41). Because nonsense is already a topic of much interest in education circles, it will provide an interesting and productive place from which to address some of the literacy concerns related to children’s literature, specifically, the homogenization and colonization of children through the act of reading (Zipes 41; Nodelman and Reimer 97).

As mentioned earlier, the debates surrounding definitions of nonsense extend to its date of origin. Some scholars have traced literary nonsense as far back as 405 BC (Anderson and Apseloff 9-10), while others have pointed out that nonsense, as wordplay, has likely existed as long as language itself (Tigges, “Nonsense” 41). In contrast, there are those who view nonsense as originating in the parodies and rhetorical pastimes of 17th century high culture (Reynolds 46). These discrepancies notwithstanding, the majority of critics tend to agree that the genre really took shape in the 19th century, with the arrival of nonsense writers Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (Tigges, Literary Nonsense 2, 6; Tigges, “Nonsense” 41; Heyman and Shortsleeve 167-168). Indeed, it is on this particular period that I wish to focus. The rise of literary nonsense in the 18th and 19th centuries is significant to this study because it accompanied the rise of
children’s literature (Heyman and Shortsleeve 166-167). New definitions of ‘nonsense’
coincided with new definitions of ‘child’ and the reductive assumptions made about both
continue to impact how adults estimate the intellectual merits of children and literary nonsense
(Tigges, Literary Nonsense 4). Exploring the complexity of literary nonsense therefore allows us
to interrogate the notions of simplicity underlying its association with childhood. Doing so forces
us to question the ‘sense’ (or lack of sense) behind the beliefs we have come to accept as
accurate representations of reality.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Simply stated, the purpose of this study is to explore how nonsense verse disrupts the
conventions of children’s literature. Building on current research, I attempt to question and
qualify the popular assertion that nonsense functions as a ‘liberating’ form of literature. Scholars
have already identified the “radical potential” of nonsense to free society from old mindsets
(Reynolds 1). According to Kimberley Reynolds, nonsense “is more concerned with changing
the present than restoring the past” (55). This concern with change, however, suggests that
nonsense, despite its rejection of coherent meaning, is still capable of disseminating ideologies.
Indeed, this capacity is partly why Reynolds identifies nonsense as a means for adult authors to
voice their anticonservatism. Consequently, the fact remains that the power dynamics inherent
within children’s literature are at work within nonsense texts. Although nonsense may upset
cultural status quos, there is still an adult author who is trying to influence a child reader.

In an effort to account for this relationship between adult author and child reader, this
thesis inquires as to whether nonsense verse affirms or destabilizes the authority of the nonsense
writer by revealing or concealing his/her presence. Only by asking this question can I determine
the extent to which nonsense verse is actually liberating, or deceptively limiting. Reynolds has
noted that literary nonsense “combines disguise, masquerade, and imposture. It simultaneously purports to say nothing and points to meanings that may or may not be there” (98). This propensity towards concealment bears important implications for the presence of the adult author and his or her potential influence over the child reader. Linking Reynolds’ observation to Nodelman’s conception of the hidden adult, the question of whether nonsense conceals or exposes the adult presence becomes crucial. Adopting the critical lenses of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory provides me with a framework through which to outline this relationship and consider the power dynamics at work within it. Specifically, it enables me to ask and attempt to answer the following questions:

1) Does children’s nonsense verse expose or conceal the adult presence within children’s literature?

2) How does this exposure or concealment affect our understanding of the liberating effects of children’s nonsense verse?

Exploring these questions will contribute new insights to discussions of children’s nonsense verse and offer a more nuanced understanding of the way it may or may not disrupt the processes of colonization/domestication inherent to children’s literature.

1.4 The Significance of the Study

Historically, literary nonsense, like children’s literature, has been oversimplified and undervalued by the majority of the adult world. This oversimplification, as already mentioned, is largely due to misplaced assumptions about the complexity of nonsense as a literary form and the capabilities of the children with which it is associated (Shortsleeve qtd. in Heyman and Shortsleeve 167). The majority of the adult world tends to regard nonsense as child’s play. Consequently, the terms ‘nonsense’ and ‘child’ carry similar connotations; both are often seen as
frivolous and inconsequential. By dismantling the idea that nonsense is ‘childish’ we can thus challenge the popular belief that children are ‘nonsensical’ or ‘childish’ in the manner adults expect them to be.

One of the ways this thesis proposes to dismantle such a belief is by addressing those assumptions that underrate children’s speech and wordplay. Like nonsense verse, children’s language use is often nonstandard in its form, content, and presentation. In *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), British folklorists Iona and Peter Opie identify the negative impact adults’ critical attitudes toward children’s language use can have. “Grownups,” they write, “have outgrown the schoolchild’s lore. If made aware of it they tend to deride it; and they actively seek to suppress its livelier manifestations. Certainly they do nothing to encourage it” (Opie and Opie, *Lore and Language* 1). If nonsense verse does resemble elements of children’s speech, then examining its complexity has the potential to help us appreciate children’s language skills. While educators have noted the value of wordplay to children’s linguistic development (Geller 41), there nevertheless remains a prejudice towards nonstandard speech that continues to limit children’s attempts at self-expression in and outside the classroom (Nel 10). This study builds on others to help remove that prejudice by challenging its ideological underpinnings.

Challenging the ideological underpinnings that seek to standardize children’s language use, however, simultaneously involves acknowledging the ways they represent an adult effort to control children’s behavior. Children’s literature, as has been pointed out, communicates an ideal of childhood that all children are meant to aspire to, and thereby encourages the homogenization of children by having them conform to one specific model of behavior (Zipes 41). Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer refer to this model as “the tyranny of the norm” (95). According to them, “[f]ar too many children learn to be exactly as limited as adults expect them to be—and if
they don’t, they often learn to respect the tyranny of the norm, and hide their lack of limitations from others” (Nodelman and Reimer 95). Nonsense verse has the potential to upset this norm and reveal the tyranny behind it. By highlighting the arbitrary nature of language and subverting the hierarchical social structures embedded in it, nonsense can draw attention to the way language frames our understanding of reality. To the extent that nonsense exposes reality and identity as subjective constructions, it shows children that they can re-construct their own perceptions of the world to be less limiting than the one handed to them by adults.

Still, recognizing that language is arbitrary is only one of the ways nonsense verse can prove a liberating and educational experience for children. After all, in order to truly escape the tyranny of the norm children have to identify who is attempting to inform their sense of reality, and, by extension, their sense of themselves. Accordingly, the question of whether nonsense verse reveals the adult presence in children’s literature is extremely relevant to discussions surrounding the development of children’s critical literacy skills. Nonsense writers like Dr. Seuss, for example, have been praised for their ability to ‘liberate’ child readers through the anti-authoritarian attitudes they project in their work (Nel 11-12). And yet, Seuss’s questioning of adult authority is not complete if he neglects to draw attention to his own subjectivity and the way he, as an adult writer, is trying to influence his readers. Otherwise, he is merely encouraging children to reject one adult view of childhood in favor of another. Consequently, true liberation, I suggest, has to come from children’s awareness of Seuss’s subjective presence, because it allows them to critically reflect on the ideas he puts forth in his books.

Nonsense, however, not only has the potential to validate children’s linguistic play and their desire to question authority, but also their need to explore and discover information—even that which adults prefer be kept hidden. Nodelman observes that children’s literature attempts to
sublimate, “a variety of forms of knowledge—sexual, cultural, historical—theoretically only available to and only understandable by adults” (Hidden 206). This sublimation is often thwarted by nonsense, which is characterized by its tendency to voice the subversive and unacceptable (Ede, “An Introduction” 59-60; Saltman 64; Geller 96). Nonsense verse, in this respect, may highlight what Nodelman identifies as the “adult unconscious” of children’s literature (Hidden 206). Reynolds comments on this “unconscious” aspect of children’s nonsense when she discusses the “shadow side” of Lear and Carroll’s work, which gives voice to the darker desires and tensions they experienced (51). Indeed, because literary nonsense is often viewed as similar to dreams, scholars have frequently applied Freudian psychoanalysis to their interpretations of it (Reynolds 51). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the fact that nonsense has the potential to illuminate the forbidden topics of children’s fiction (i.e., its unconscious) means that it gives nonsense writers and child readers an outlet to combat repressive social practices, such as censorship.

The concept of foreignization provides a useful framework for this discussion of nonsense verse, because it illuminates the domesticating aspects of children’s literature and accounts for the role of the adult author. Unlike traditional children’s books, which can make children feel like outsiders for being different from the norm they present, foreignizing children’s texts remind readers that understandings of normal are relative—dependent on personal subjectivity. What adults understand as a normal childhood may very well appear abnormal to children whose experiences depart from it. In the context of this study, Translation Theory thus reveals why it is problematic to imagine children as belonging to a separate culture. The Opies offer an example of such problems when they write:
And the folklorist and anthropologist can, without travelling a mile from his door, examine a thriving unselfconscious culture (the word ‘culture’ is used here deliberately) which is as unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as little affected by it, as is the culture of some dwindling aboriginal tribe living out its helpless existence in the hinterland of a native reserve. (*Lore and Language* 2)

While this statement is obviously dated, it is nevertheless revealing of the ways adults demean children, as they do other cultures, by regarding them as inherently lacking or ‘less than’ adults. The very existence of a separate children’s literature signifies that the beliefs underlying this view of childhood are not completely erased. Children are treated as ‘other,’ and their status as such marginalizes them, along with the rest of the ‘unsophisticated’ non-western world.

This thesis, like other scholarship in the field of children’s literature, recognizes why such a comparison is unsuitable, both in its equation of western children with colonized peoples, and in the way it promotes a division between children and adults. By exploring how nonsense exposes the ambivalences of children’s literature (*Nodelman, Hidden* 185) and potentially upsets the project of colonization it undertakes, this study questions the cultural ideologies that draw boundaries along the lines of age. However, it does so with the consciousness that such a distinction is but a symptom of the way ideologies function on deeper and more disturbing levels to create further divisions and inequalities among different races and genders. The problem is multilayered and systemic, but nonsense looks at the linguistic structures that govern these systems of meaning and provides people with the means to critically refute them.

Finally, dismantling reductive notions of childhood involves recognizing that children’s literature, as an institution that functions within the larger culture industry, is tainted by the same consumerism and commercialism that “minimize[s] and marginalize[s] the value of critical and
creative thinking, and with it, the worth of the individual human being” (Zipes 41). Examining the ways in which nonsense verse disrupts the cultural codes of these production industries allows us to reflect on how it promotes critical and creative thinking and privileges the worth of individual subjectivity (i.e., the child reader’s). Acknowledging that children’s literature is part of a larger institution requires that we take into consideration the various facets of its production, dissemination, and reception. For this reason Jack Zipes urges scholars of children’s literature to take an interdisciplinary approach to their studies (36). While this study does not engage in action research in the classroom, its theoretical insights have implications for educational practice, which I hope to take up in future research. Uncovering and disproving previous assumptions about children’s wordplay might prove equally enlightening to current literacy discussions and the present assumptions being made about children’s language use.

1.5 Rationale and Criteria for Primary Text Selection

As previously mentioned, scholars generally agree that, as a literary genre, nonsense did not take off until the 19th century with the work of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 2, 7). Lear’s various works: *A Book of Nonsense* (1846), *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1871), *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, etc.* (1872), and *Laughable Lyrics: A Fourth Book of Nonsense Poems, Songs, Botany, Music, etc.* (1877), created a literary application for the term “nonsense” (Heyman and Shortsleeve 167) and this application was further expanded by Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), which explored and exposed, in a manner quite different from Lear, the logical and linguistic forms nonsense can take (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 85-87; Sewell, *Nonsense* 7). Indeed, it is because of their considerable influence on the genre of literary
nonsense that Lear and Carroll are considered its “fathers” or “grandmasters” (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 84, 165; Anderson and Apseloff 19).

Due to the influential nature of their works and the fact that their texts cross over between the worlds of adult and child fiction, Lear and Carroll have received considerable attention from literary scholars, especially those interested in nonsense literature (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 140, 150; Anderson and Apseloff 19). Most studies attribute the two poets’ work in the 19th century to the growth of literary nonsense, as it occurred in the next (Anderson and Apseloff 20, 22). Traversing oceans and continents, Lear and Carroll’s nonsense verses have had an incredible impact on writers and poets everywhere (Anderson and Apseloff 19). Tracing the full extent of their influence in various languages and literatures, along with the trajectory of literary nonsense itself, is an enormous task that is beyond the scope of this study. In an attempt to build on the scholarship surrounding British nonsense, however, I have chosen to focus on the development of nonsense poetry in English North American children’s literature in the 20th and 21st centuries. Unfortunately, narrowing the scope of this investigation to North America means that I neglect British nonsense poets, both for children and adults, whose contributions to contemporary English children’s literature are worthy of mention. Versifiers such as Mervin Peake and Spike Milligan, for instance, have had a considerable impact in their own right on the genre of literary nonsense and deserve further study.

On a similar note, while any discussion of literary nonsense must acknowledge the contributions of Lear and Carroll, this study will not be taking their works as its primary texts. As indicated earlier, these poets have already received substantial attention from literary critics, and it is one of the objectives of this study to extend the field of research surrounding literary nonsense by examining its outer limits, that is, those areas that have received less consideration
than others. At the same time, I am interested in studying nonsense writers who, in their own way, have influenced the development of literary nonsense in their cultures as much as Lear and Carroll have in theirs. In doing so I am asking: Who are the most prominent children’s nonsense poets in the United States and Canada? Such a question is extremely subjective of course, and has more than one possible answer. Still, it nevertheless serves as an underlying guideline in the selection of this study’s primary texts and will be used as a justification for my choices.

In view of this objective, my research begins chronologically in the United States, whose children’s literature, for a number of political and economic reasons, developed at a far faster rate than that of Canada (Nodelman, *Hidden* 290-291). To be sure, much of English Canadian children’s literature produced prior to the 1970s was published in the United States. Therefore, it is highly likely that the industry of American children’s literature, including its nonsense writers, influenced the development of Canadian children’s nonsense literature as much as England did (Nodelman, *Hidden* 290-292). To gain an understanding of the impact American nonsense writers have had on English North American children’s literature, it is important to consider their reception in Canada. Likewise, it is equally important when considering the impact of Canadian nonsense writers to reflect on their reception in the United States.

That being said, this study is limited to North American English children’s nonsense poets, which means it excludes a number of excellent nonsense writers. When selecting my primary texts I did not, for example, consider those American authors who write nonsense prose, such as Peggy Parish, James Marshall, and Arnold Lobel, or even such diverse talents as Jim Henson. ³ By the same token, because I am focusing specifically on the language and poetics of

³ Other nonsense writers include Carl Sandburg.
nonsense verse, I did not consider the work of nonsense illustrators. Still, narrowing the focus of this study to nonsense poetry did not exempt a number of nonsense poets who act as both writer and illustrator of their works. Edward Gorey is one American nonsense poet who wrote and illustrated his own nonsense, much like Lear did. Gorey’s work, it has been observed, is on the border between adult and child nonsense (Tigges, Literary Nonsense 183; Anderson and Apseloff 25); however, my reason for overlooking him pertains mainly to the fact that there are other nonsense poets who are more iconic in their status and influence. Theodor Seuss Geisel (a.k.a. Dr. Seuss) is one such person. Geisel’s nonsense is of such significant import that Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff use it to frame their 1989 study of English nonsense literature: *Nonsense Literature for Children: Aesop to Seuss*.

Indeed, as Philip Nel’s *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (2004) details, Geisel is, in his own way, a grandmaster nonsense poet in North American culture. According to Nel, Seuss is an American icon because he “represents children’s literature, nonsense poetry, energetic cartoon surrealism, and the process of learning to read” (1). On this level of impact, Seuss is similar to Carroll, whose *Alice* books have become icons for the field of children’s literature. Like Carroll, Seuss’s books (he published 46 during his lifetime) demonstrate an awareness and critique of different educational practices. *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), for example, was written to provide children with an interesting alternative to the boring *Dick and Jane* primers (Nel 3). The subversive text became so successful that it led Random House to develop a line of Beginner Books for early readers, thereby making Seuss’s Cat the face of child literacy in North America (Nel 3). Alternatively, the style of Seuss’s work, his lively verses and illustrations, has led to the suggestion that he might be “the all-American Lear” (qtd. in Nel 10). These similarities with Carroll and Lear notwithstanding, any further doubts on the subject of Seuss’s influence are
assuaged by his accomplishments. The impressive list includes: three Academy Awards, two Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award (1970), the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal (1980) and a Pulitzer Prize (1984) for his contribution to children’s literature, all of which helped earn him a posthumous star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2004.

Because Seuss is such a significant figure in the field of children’s nonsense verse in North America, he both meets and represents the standard used to justify my selection of authors/primary texts. Upon choosing him as one of the authors under consideration, I therefore specified a further set of criteria for the others that would make up the remainder of the study. In order to qualify, any texts/poets would also have to be:

1) Award winning: They must have received literary recognition for their work.

2) Distinctive in style: The poets must possess a distinctively recognizable poetic style.

While other writers may influence their work, the poets themselves are not viewed as poor imitators of those writers.

3) A national presence: The poets should be well received outside of the academy and literary circles. In other words, their influence extends into schools or various areas of popular culture.

Seuss’s work is all of these things, which is partly why he can be discussed as a highly influential North American children’s nonsense poet. In looking for a second American versifier, however, a number of other poets came to attention. Carolyn Wells, Ogden Nash, William Jay Smith, John Ciardi, David McCord, Laura E. Richards, Theodore Roethke, Gelett Burgess and John Updike are all distinguished American poets, as is proven by their mention in various anthologies. Unlike Seuss though, their work is less distinguishably ‘children’s literature.’ Moreover, while some of their poetry may fall in the category of literary nonsense, nonsense
does not necessarily define their style of poetry in the same way that it does Seuss, Carroll, and Lear.

Nancy Willard and Jack Prelutsky on the other hand, are two American children’s poets whom I strongly considered for this study. Both have written a number of poetry collections and are award-winning writers for children. While Willard’s work has earned her the first Newbery Medal (1982) for a volume of poetry, Prelutsky’s work has brought him the honor of being the first Children’s Poet Laureate (2006-2008) in the United States. Each in his or her own right may be considered an influential American nonsense poet; however, there was one other versifier who caught my attention. Shel Silverstein, known to children as ‘Uncle Shelby,’ was a 20th century nonsense poet whose work has had a significant impact on American culture. A poet, illustrator, and lyricist, Silverstein’s work, like Seuss’s, earned him recognition outside the field of children’s literature. In the course of his career he received a Grammy (1970) and nominations for both an Oscar (1990) and a Golden Globe (1990). Also similar to Seuss, he was posthumously inducted into a place of honor, in this case, the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (2014).

Still, my main reason for selecting Silverstein as the second American poet for this study is not so much that he resembles Seuss in any way, but that he complements him. While Silverstein’s work has earned him national recognition, it is his distinctive style, so different from Seuss’s, that drew me to his poetry. While Seuss’s verse follows a similar pattern in each of his books, the meter of Silverstein’s poems change with each page, as does the rhyme scheme, which may or may not be present. Unlike Seuss, Silverstein often writes in free verse, and, whereas Seuss writes rhymed narrative nonsense poems, Silverstein writes collections of isolated verses. These differences aside, Silverstein, like Seuss, has become popular with educators,
children, and parents alike. According to a 2001 survey put out by Publishers Weekly, Silverstein has three children’s books within the top 25, two of which, Where the Sidewalk Ends (1974) and A Light in the Attic (1981), are poetry collections (Turvey, “All-Time Bestselling Children’s Books”). Also, in a 2007 online survey put out by the National Education Association, Where the Sidewalk Ends ranked within the Teachers’ Top 100 Books for Children.

And yet, at the same time, Silverstein is also controversial. A Light in the Attic places 51 on the American Library Association’s (ALA) list of the “100 most frequently challenged books: 1990-1999.” The cited reasons for these moves to censorship all deal with the subversive content of Silverstein’s poetry. According to the American Library Association’s Hit List for Children 2: Frequently Challenged Books, the successful challenges pertaining to A Light in the Attic have led to its removal from second grade classrooms (Huffman, Texas, 1989) and to children’s restricted access with parental permission in public school libraries (Duval County, Florida, 1992) (Becker et al. 54-55). The common complaint linking all of these objections is that the book’s content is inappropriate for a child audience. In Webb City, Missouri (1996), one parent “protested that the book imparts a ‘dreary’ and ‘negative’ message,” while other parents in Lake County, Florida (1993) claimed that “the book ‘promotes disrespect, horror, and violence’” (qtd. in Becker et al. 54). Generally speaking, these parents have all found Silverstein’s work to be extremely unsettling.

However, it is precisely because of the unsettling nature of Silverstein’s poetry that I wish to include him in this study. Nonsense, after all, is known for its subversive tendencies, its ability to speak the unspeakable and think the unthinkable. Linda Gibson Geller notes in her study on wordplay that children often use nonsense to “test the limits of cultural ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ in the expression of subversive, often forbidden sentiments” (96). Similarly, Judith
Saltman notes how 19th century nonsense served as “an anarchic means of shedding the straightjacket of English society” (64). By testing and breaking these boundaries, children’s nonsense verse challenges the assumptions we make about childhood, especially the innocence of children. Thus, Silverstein’s work is valuable to this study precisely because of its controversial nature. If nonsense has a foreignizing effect on readers, one that points to the adult presence/subjectivity embedded within children’s literature, it simultaneously points to those topics that are taboo or forbidden. Such glimpses of the ‘adult unconscious’ of children’s texts allow us to examine the ideological foundations and legitimacy of the assumptions we make about childhood, as well as the possible harmful effects censorship can have.

Having selected the American nonsense poets I wish to include in this study, I then had to decide which specific texts to examine. Of Seuss’s works I have chosen to look at one of his ‘Big Books’ and one of his ‘Beginner Books,’ so as to capture a wider range of his nonsense. *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955) is a longer and more complex book than *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!* (1978), which is one of the early reader books that succeeded *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Both books, however, have to do with language and literacy, which will be relevant to my discussion of nonsense and education. Of Silverstein’s works, on the other hand, I have chosen to explore select poems from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974), which is so popular with teachers, as well as a selection from *A Light in the Attic* (1981), whose controversial history will supplement my investigation of the ways nonsense might expose the adult presence within children’s literature.

In order to better represent the diversity of Silverstein’s style and the span of his influence, I have also decided to look at his book *Runny Babbit*, which was published posthumously in 2005. By examining a selection of Silverstein’s work from three different decades, I will attain a better understanding of the way it relates to children’s literature in the 21st century. Due to their success
in the American publishing industry and media, both Seuss and Silverstein are known and celebrated in Canada; therefore, it is quite likely that Canadians will be familiar with the selected works.

Shifting our focus from the United States to Canada, however, there are comparatively fewer children’s nonsense poets to choose from that would have the status or level of recognition of Seuss and Silverstein. Generally speaking, the selection of Canadian children’s poetry is scant compared to that of the United States and England. At least, this was the state of affairs, as it existed for much of the twentieth century. Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman comment on this issue in *The New Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian Children’s Literature in English* (1990). “Poetry written for children,” they observe, “especially young children, usually comes in the form of light-hearted versifying, but even this was scarce from about the 1940s to the 1970s” (Egoff and Saltman 294). Egoff and Saltman mention two poetry anthologies of note: *Canadian Verse for Boys and Girls* (1930) and *The Wind Has Wings: Poems From Canada* (1968), the latter of which, they point out, possesses greater literary merit (293).

Further limiting the selection of Canadian children’s nonsense verse is the fact that, of the small number of Canadian children’s poets, there are even fewer nonsense poets. Nevertheless, among these, one name stands out from the rest. In his own way, Dennis Lee may have done for Canadian children’s nonsense poetry what Seuss did for American. His best-selling nonsense collection, *Alligator Pie* (1974), has made him “a household name in Canadian families with young children” (Egoff and Saltman 295). Lee is both a scholar and a Governor General Award winning poet for adults; however, what makes him most significant to this study is the fact that his poetry has earned him the title of Canada’s “‘Father Goose’” (296). Like Seuss, Lee’s influence and popularity on a national level, is considerable. Egoff and Saltman not only describe
him as the “seminal influence” who “began the modern school of Canadian verse for children” (304), but also use him as a model by which to categorize all other 20th century Canadian children’s nonsense verse. “Lee’s influence,” they write, “can be seen in two different streams of verse—the domestic and light, and the black-humoured” (296). While Lee himself may not have the iconic status of a personage like Seuss, his work, especially *Alligator Pie*, serves as an icon of Canadian nationhood. On these merits I have chosen to include him in this study.

Egoff and Saltman list several other Canadian poets along with Lee, whose work would fall under the category of nonsense. These include such talents as Robert Heidbreder, Lois Simmie, Sheree Fitch, and sean o huigin. However, while all of these poets possess their own style and originality, they still share many characteristics with Lee’s work, which is presumably why Egoff and Saltman group them according to his two streams of verse. Heidbreder, Simmie and Fitch, for example, all write for younger children, and, while o huigin writes for an older audience, Egoff and Saltman note that his work does not achieve the “crucial precision and balance” of Carroll’s and Lear’s (299). According to them, a nonsense poet needs to understand “that order and logic are needed to create convincing nonsense, and that there is a fine line between gentle irony and bleak satire, between fantastical light verse and unmodified surrealism” (299). The standard these scholars set for nonsense poets is high, as is evidenced by their overall appraisal of Canadian nonsense verse. They temper their compliments of Lee’s poetry with the acknowledgement that his work, “and the writers that followed him, although always showing some originality, is basically derivative of nursery rhymes and of Robert Louis Stevenson, A.A.

4 Anderson and Apseloff comment on the fact that Lee is “not yet well known in the United States” and that his “nonsense verse deserves more recognition in [the United States] than it has yet received” (132-133). They also compare Lee to Silverstein, describing him as the other’s “kindred soul” (132).
Milne, or Henrich Hoffman” (304). Such a statement serves almost as a call to Canadian poets to increase the sophistication and creativity of the country’s literary output.

Fortunately, Canadian children’s poetry has grown since the time in which Egoff and Saltman conducted their study. In fact, there is one twenty-first century poet in particular, who might actually meet the high standard of excellence they set for nonsense versifiers. JonArno Lawson is the writer of a number of sophisticated poetry collections for children. He has won the prestigious The Lion and The Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry four different times in 2007, 2009, 2013, and 2014, a feat accomplished by no other poet to date. Most recently, Lawson and illustrator Sydney Smith were awarded a 2015 Governor General Award for their silent picture book, Sidewalk Flowers. While Lawson’s work has not pervaded the realm of popular culture to the extent that the other poets’ have, his presence is becoming known. He is actively involved in the educational sphere, having taught children’s poetry at Simmons College, Boston, the University of British Columbia, and leading poetry workshops for children and adults across the country. As someone who is recognized both in Canada and the United States for his talents, Lawson’s work is deserving of critical attention and will offer a high level of artistry to this study’s discussion of the complexities of nonsense verse. At the same time, his work will serve as an indicator of the direction nonsense verse is taking in the 21st century.

Of Lee and Lawson’s respective poetry anthologies I will be examining a selection of poems from Lee’s Alligator Pie (1974) and Nicholas Knock and Other People (1974), along with a selection of those from Lawson’s Black Stars in a White Night Sky (2006) and Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box (2012). Together, these various texts will represent a range of complexity appropriate for children of various ages, while providing an example of Canada’s
most renowned nonsense poetry. Lee’s *Alligator Pie* is one of the most beloved Canadian children’s poetry anthologies written in English and Lawson’s anthologies are award winning in their sophisticated address of taboo topics and experiences. Along with Seuss and Silverstein, the work of these Canadian poets will provide an excellent foundation on which to base this discussion of nonsense, foreignization, and the processes of domestication/colonization that take place through children’s literature.

1.6 **Significant Terms**

The following list of terms defines some of the major critical and theoretical concepts used in this thesis. The terms and their meanings will be addressed again in Chapter Two: the Literature Review, and Chapter Three: the Methodology.

**Genre:** Debates concerning definitions of the term “genre” are as contentious and diverse as those surrounding nonsense. While *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines “genre” as simply “a kind or style, esp. of art or literature” (491), it fails to account for the complexity underlying the different classifications that exist, and the systems of categorization they represent. An entire area of academic study is devoted to genre theory, which attempts to address and account for the different approaches to genre classification. Describing three fundamental, and to some extent, oppositional approaches, G. Thomas Couser writes:

Some genres are identified primarily in terms of their formal features. (The sonnet is defined in terms of its length, metre, and rhyme scheme.) Others are distinguished by reference to content as well as form. (The epic is associated with a serious tone and elevated style but also a certain kind of hero.) Still others are defined primarily in terms of their subjects. (140)
While these different understandings of genre have been the focus of many academic disputes, there are scholars who have chosen to see the value in the different perspectives each classification system offers (Abrams 77; Yu 363). Underlying their acceptance is the realization that, “definitions that may once have seemed clear have become blurred; boundaries that once seemed distinct have been breached” (Couser 140). Therefore, while I adopt a specific understanding of genre in this thesis that is formulated more on a content-approach classification system, I do so with the awareness that it is but one of many ways of conceiving the relationship between these literary texts. Others may prefer to view nonsense verse as a sub-form of the genre of poetry instead of as a sub-form of the genre of literary nonsense. Both approaches offer different and valuable insights, and my choice of one is not intended to discredit the other.

Indeed, the subject matter of this thesis heightens my awareness of alternative definitions of genre. Nonsense, after all, resists one definitive meaning, and it seems only appropriate that any study of it be conscious of the arbitrary nature of its own reasoning. Even scholars outside of the field of literary nonsense recognize this truth. “For most critics at the present time,” M.H. Abrams observes, “…genres are widely conceived to be rather arbitrary ways of classifying literature, yet convenient in critical discussions” (77). Accordingly, it is with an understanding of the arbitrary nature of literary classification and the convenience it lends this critical discussion of nonsense that I adopt Wim Tigges’s concept of nonsense as a literary genre, as outlined in An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense (1988). Tigges bases his definition of genre on the respective works of theorist Alastair Fowler and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes (1982), Fowler describes the ways in which literary scholars have used Wittgenstein’s theories to create a different approach to genre classification, one that is based on Wittgenstein’s concept of
“family resemblances” (qtd. in Fowler 41). Explaining the value of this conceptualization, Fowler observes: “Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all” (41). This approach to genre classification allows me to view nonsense verse as belonging to a larger family of nonsense texts, all of which bear certain recognizable features. Because I am first and foremost concerned with what makes a text “nonsense,” I am privileging literary nonsense as the tradition through which I trace the relationships between my primary texts. If this organization is subversive in any way, then it is, in my opinion, all the more appropriate for characterizing nonsense, which seeks to upset cultural norms and critical frameworks.

**Literary Nonsense:** For the purpose of this thesis I am adopting Wim Tigges’s generic definition of literary nonsense. According to Tigges, the “generic repertoire” of nonsense literature consists of four basic characteristics: “the tension between meaning and its absence, the creation of reality by means of language, the absence of emotional involvement, and the element of play” (Fowler qtd. in Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 49; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 257). These characteristics will be discussed in greater length and detail in Chapter Two, the Literature Review.

**Nonsense Verse:** According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008), nonsense verse is: “A kind of humorous poetry that amuses by deliberately using strange non-existent words and illogical ideas. Its masters in English are Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, followed by G.K. Chesterton and Ogden Nash” (Baldick 232). This definition is basic at best, and will be modified in accordance with Tigges’s understanding of the four characteristics of literary nonsense in later chapters.
**Light Verse:** A term often used in relation to nonsense verse, although not necessarily synonymous with it. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008) defines light verse as:

> The general term for various kinds of verse that have no serious purpose and no solemnity of tone. They may deal with trivial subjects, or bring a light-hearted attitude to more serious ones. Light verse is often characterized by a display of technical accomplishments in the handling of difficult rhymes, metres, and stanza forms. The many forms of light verse include Anacreontics, clerihews, epigrams, jingles, limericks, mock epics, nonsense verse, parodies, and *vers de société*. (Baldick 186)

Accordingly, while nonsense verse might fall under the broader category of light verse, it does not follow that all light verse qualifies as nonsense verse. To avoid confusion in this area, Tigges’s understanding of literary nonsense will be used to distinguish between the two.

**Foreignization:** A term used in Translation Studies to describe a certain approach to translation. “Foreignizing translation,” Lawrence Venuti writes, “signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language” (20). Foreignization, in other words, represents any deviation from the norms of the target culture. This deviation can occur at a semantic or grammatical level. A translator, for example, can choose to leave in a foreign word, spelling, or concept. The idea behind a foreignizing translation strategy is to “stage an alien reading experience” that emphasizes the mediated nature of the translation (20). Foreignization reminds readers of the subjectivity or “ethnocentric violence” involved in the act of translation and its potential to influence readers’ perceptions of the original text/source culture (20). In this respect, the aims of a foreignizing translation are opposite those of a domesticating translation.
**Domestication:** Unlike a foreignizing approach to translation, domestication represents an effort to ensure a *fluent* reading experience for the target language reader, one that is not disrupted by unfamiliar elements. As Venuti notes:

Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work ‘invisible,’ producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems ‘natural,’ i.e., not translated. (5) Instead of inviting readers to adjust to the foreign elements of the source text and culture, the translator alters the texts to make it fit the cultural norms of the target culture.

**Colonialist Ideology:** Referring to the ideology underlying colonialism. In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006), Lois Tyson defines colonialist ideology as: “the colonizers’ assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples” (419). Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer recognize correspondences between the way colonizers viewed/view indigenous people and the way adults view children. In the past, colonizers often viewed and represented indigenous peoples as childish because, like children, they were seen as somewhat savage and in need of control.

**Postcolonial Theory:** Describing the critical framework underlying Postcolonial Theory Tyson writes: “postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies” (418). While postcolonial criticism is most often used in reference to formerly colonized peoples, it is also, Tyson notes:

…particularly effective at helping us see connections among all the domains of our experience—the psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic—
in ways that show us just how inseparable these categories are in our lived experience of ourselves and the world. (417)

Indeed, it is for this reason that scholars use Postcolonial Theory to look at other forms of human oppression (Tyson 417). Consequently, Postcolonial Theory often intersects with critical theories such as Marxism, feminism, queer studies, and African American theory. Nodelman and Reimer adopt this approach in their theorizing of children’s literature, which takes a postcolonial view of the relationship between the adult writer (i.e., colonizer) and the child reader (i.e., colonized subject).

**Critical Literacy:** Based on the work by education theorist Paulo Freire, the term “critical literacy” has developed over time to mean the “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke 5).

**Metafiction:** A term often used in association with nonsense, The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (2008) defines metafiction as: “Fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status…the term is normally used for works that involve a significant degree of self-consciousness about themselves as fictions” (Baldick 203).

**Implied Reader:** Coined by literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, the term “implied reader” is often used by adherents of reader-response criticism. The term refers to the:

…hypothetical figure of the reader to whom a given work is designed to address itself.

Any text may be said to presuppose an ‘ideal’ reader who has the particular attitudes (moral, cultural, etc.) appropriate to that text in order for it to achieve its full effect. This
implied reader is to be distinguished from actual readers, who may be unable or unwilling to occupy the position of the implied reader. (Baldick 166)

1.7 Chapter Overview

The interdisciplinary nature of children’s literature requires that I situate this study’s discussion of children’s nonsense verse within the context of both English and Education studies. Accordingly, the literature review that follows in Chapter Two consists of two parts: 1) an overview of the genre of English literary nonsense and; 2) an outline of the research surrounding nonsensical wordplay and its relation to language learning/literacy development. After providing this scholastic survey on nonsense, I introduce the theoretical frame that will be employed in this thesis: Postcolonial Theory as applied by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer to children’s literature, and Translation Theory as posited by Lawrence Venuti. Establishing a connection between these theories and the previous work relating to literary nonsense and children’s literature, I then transition into a discussion of methodology, which I detail thoroughly in Chapter Three. Summarizing the methods employed, I explain how these theories form the critical lens through which I construct the research questions asked of the primary texts.

Moving on to the analysis of the primary texts, the Fourth and Fifth Chapters contain the research findings of this study. The poets and their texts are grouped according to nationality: the Fourth Chapter examines the American texts and the Fifth examines the Canadian. In these chapters I investigate whether or not each poet’s nonsense verse subverts the colonizing efforts of children’s literature by drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of language and the presence/subjectivity of the adult author. In the process, I reflect on how the critical and creative play of the author’s nonsense verse attempts to engage children in active reading processes that promote critical literacy development. Finally, in Chapter Six, Conclusions and Discussion, I
return to and answer the research questions, note the general similarities and differences among
the poets’ works, address the limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 A Brief History of Literary Nonsense: Defining the Genre

Literary nonsense is difficult to define. Scholars have and continue to disagree as to whether or not the term best describes “a stylistic device, literary mode, or genre” (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 2). There is no right answer to this debate, for nonsense can and does operate at these various levels to different effect in literature. Therefore, rather than deny the existence of these assorted functions it is more important to clarify how they work independently or in conjunction with one another in different texts. For the purposes of this study, nonsense will be considered at the broader level of genre, within which it can also be seen to function as both a mode and a device. In adopting this premise, I am asserting that nonsense literature contains a specific set of features. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and explain what those features are, by tracing the work of other scholars in the field. Thus begins this brief overview of the English scholarship surrounding literary nonsense.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on the origins of literary nonsense. While some have dated texts as far back as Ancient Greece (Anderson and Apseloff 9-10), others suspect that nonsense has existed as long as language itself (Tigges, “Nonsense” 41). Where children’s nonsense verse is concerned, a number of researchers have suggested the influence of nursery rhymes (Heyman and Shortsleeve 166; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 259), but even this view is not universal (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 8). Still, the majority of nonsense scholars tend to agree that, whatever literary nonsense is, it is exemplified in the work of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (Anderson and Apseloff 19-20; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 2, 48). In English literature at least, these poets are recognized as the grandmasters of the genre.
Although they possess different literary styles, Lear and Carroll’s work presents a standard against which all other nonsense literature is measured (Sewell, *Nonsense* 7: Anderson and Apseloff 20; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 49). In setting this standard, they have become a common point of reference for nonsense scholars, especially those interested in the relation between literary nonsense and children’s literature. Lear and Carroll’s status as children’s writers makes them even more important to this study, which is concerned with literary nonsense as it developed in the 19th century, concurrently with children’s literature. My concern with the 19th century extends to the dominant definition of nonsense it produced, a definition that was influenced in part by the grandmasters themselves. Lear and Carroll did not set as high a standard, as much as they did a normative one, when it came to defining their nonsense.

According to Michael Heyman and Kevin Shortsleeve, both writers viewed their nonsense as “pure nonsense,” or ‘no sense’ (168). Lear and Carroll’s reductive evaluation of their work most likely contributed to the popular perception that nonsense, like child’s play, is trivial and not to be taken seriously.

Unlike Lear and Carroll, I am of the mind that nonsense is more than ‘no sense.’ Therefore, in an effort to dispel this reductive view and its association with childhood, I will not be employing their definition of nonsense. On the contrary, I find that their work, and the nonsense literature of others, gains in possibilities when measured in the light of a less limited perspective. In this belief I am not alone; the scholarship surrounding nonsense reveals a growing number of people who recognize the sense underlying its creation. Judith Saltman, for example, in her chapter, “Voices of Nonsense” (1985), argues that “nonsense is not *no sense*; rather, it is a confirmation of experience and an expansion of experience” (68). Likewise, Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff claim that, “[n]onsense is not the absence of sense but a clever
subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning” (5). Words like “expansion” and “heightens” hold more potential than “no sense” for the researcher of literary nonsense. Saltman, Anderson, and Apseloff acknowledge the aspects of nonsense literature that inspire critical reflection and intellectual growth. In doing so, they simultaneously draw attention to the fact that ‘nonsense’ means different things to different people and is worth taking seriously.

Tracing the development of this serious attitude towards literary nonsense leads us back to the moment it began to be regarded as an art form in its own right. Edward Strachey’s article, “Nonsense as a Fine Art” (1888), marked one of the first attempts to view nonsense as literature. Unlike other critics of the 19th century, Strachey attributes literary merit to nonsense poetry, noting that Lear was a “man of genius” who “fixed the name of Nonsense to the Art” (357-359). Since then, Strachey’s argument regarding the value of nonsense has been supplemented by many others, including, but not limited to, those provided by G.K. Chesterton (1901), Elizabeth Sewell (1952; 1987), W. Charlton (1977), Susan Stewart (1978), Lisa Ede (1987), Wim Tigges (1987; 1988), Judith Saltman (1985), Linda Shires (1988), Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff (1989), Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994), and Michael Heyman and Kevin Shortsleeve (2011). The twentieth century in particular has seen an increase in nonsense scholarship that has proven especially useful in conceiving the genre. While there has yet to be a single definition of nonsense literature (Anderson and Apseloff 3), the growing body of scholarship does display certain nonsense trends. By highlighting these trends I can begin to outline a more specific understanding of literary nonsense that will be employed in this thesis.

One of the less contested characteristics of literary nonsense is its topsyturvydom. Strachey is one of the first scholars to comment on the way nonsense sets the world upside down,
and others, both of the “no sense” perspective\(^5\) and the “more than no sense” perspective (Anderson and Apseloff 5), generally agree. Of course, each party interprets this topsyturvydom differently. Those who find nonsense meaningless view this upset of the world as confirmation that nonsense makes no sense, whereas others suggest that this subversion of the dominant view of reality merely presents an alternative outlook. Speaking to the latter view, Susan Stewart notes in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1978) that, “[n]onsense always refers back to a sense that itself cannot be assumed” (4). According to Stewart, understandings of nonsense are directly related to understandings of common sense, which are culturally defined. Extending her argument, Anderson and Apseloff argue that, “nonsense always implies a contrast to some linguistic, spatial, emotional, or ethical form that is accepted as sense” (4). Like these scholars, I am more interested in nonsense as an alternative perspective from which to view and question society’s understanding of sense, specifically, the cultural assumptions adults make about childhood that manifest in children’s literature. I therefore view the topsyturvydom of nonsense as both a creative and critical linguistic operation.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this polarized view of topsyturvydom has produced two different perceptions of literary nonsense. One maintains that it is chaotic and irrational with little educational value, while the other insists that it is organized and rational with great educational value. The second view emerges from the belief that “[t]he very notion of topsy-turvy implies that there is a right side up” (Anderson and Apseloff 5). The educational value of nonsense, in other words, arises in the child readers’ distinction between the world of the text and the world they actually know. The fact that children can recognize the way nonsense

\[^5\text{Tigges cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Dr. Samuel Johnson as early proponents of this mindset (6). However, definitions of nonsense verse or literature found in dictionaries today still possess the tendency to dismiss it as merely trivial or amusing. See Baldick p. 232.}\]
subverts common sense can be regarded as evidence that they have mastered certain concepts (Chukovskii 101). In this respect, nonsense may confirm children’s knowledge and their attempts to make sense of the world around them (Saltman 68). We will return to and explore this educational element of nonsense further in the next section.

At present, we shift our focus to the tension created by the topsyturvydom of nonsense. The conflict between rational and irrational understandings of nonsense originates in the text itself. In as much as it inspires opposing views, topsyturvydom generates a sense of friction. While scholars have accounted for this tension using different terms, they essentially refer to the same attribute. What Elizabeth Sewell describes as the “order-disorder dialectic” of nonsense literature (*Nonsense* 46), Lisa Ede refers to simply as internal and external tensions (57). The tension they describe is created by the various contrasts found within nonsense literature, the dichotomies that subvert and refute each other, such as:

...illusion and reality and order and disorder, with such further contrasting pairs as fantasy and logic, imagination and reason, the child and the adult, the individual and society, words and their linguistic relations (language as designation and language as expression), denotation and connotation, and form and content. (Ede 57)

Readers of nonsense literature have to negotiate these dichotomies and the tension they produce in their attempts to make sense of the text. In doing so they are required to consider the basis for these polarities and their legitimacy or lack of legitimacy when it comes to representations of lived reality. Indeed, this back and forth movement is why scholars often refer to nonsense as a form of dialectic (Sewell, *Nonsense* 46; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 56).

At the linguistic level, topsyturvydom is produced through the nonsense writer’s play with language. Literary nonsense exploits the semantics of language through the use of various
devices such as puns, neologisms, portmanteau words, rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia (Saltman 67). This wordplay in turn draws attention to the arbitrary nature of language (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 60) and has led scholars like Sewell to picture literary nonsense as a kind of linguistic game, one that attempts to assert a sense of control over the universe through the manipulation of things (*Nonsense* 96). Nonsense, Sewell observes, “embark[s] on private manipulations and creations of word units” without greatly jeopardizing syntax and grammar (38). These word units, she notes, generally reference *concrete* objects (*Nonsense* 58). According to her, another characteristic of nonsense is its interest in *series* of objects (i.e., collections), which, as bizarre as they may first appear, tend to express an interest in everyday items such as “clothes, food, [and] houses” (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense*, 14). This concern with everyday items is indicative of the way nonsense interrogates our sense of normalcy, as it manifests in our perceptions of ‘ordinary’ reality.

These playful elements, however, are only some of those found within the linguistic game of nonsense. Other features include the manipulation of boundaries, a fascination with infinity, simultaneity, the reversal and inversion of logic (also known as mirroring), circularity, and arbitrariness (Stewart 57, 85, 116, 146, 171). Scholars have gone into great detail surrounding these various elements of nonsense, but for the purposes of this study the most significant observation to make is their metafictional component (Stewart 50). By drawing attention to the way language is and can be manipulated to different effect, these elements present a critical reflection and commentary on society’s interpretive procedures (Stewart 80-81). While Stewart prefers to speak of this awareness as metafictive, others like Ede refer to it as “self-reflexive” (57). Self-reflexivity is extremely important to discussions of literary nonsense and critical literacy, for it is through the self-reflexive properties of nonsense that readers are
made aware of the way language is ideological and can be used to manipulate our perceptions of reality.

Given this critical element, scholars argue that literary nonsense is not only a confirmation of reality for children, but also an interrogation of reality. Nonsense may highlight the fact that there is a ‘right side up,’ but it simultaneously questions the authority of those who determine what is “right” (Shires 271). This questioning is what leads to the ‘expansion’ and ‘heightening’ of experience that Saltman, Anderson and Apseloff mention. For it is through the subversion of reality that nonsense offers readers a view of alternative realities. Sewell suggests something along these lines when she writes:

…perhaps this is what Nonsense in its turn does: produce by re-patterning of letters in a word or of objects in a seemingly given universe, a dislocation of that given and then a re-location which, slight as it is, may yet permit glimpses of just such other orders beyond and through our usual perspectives. (“Nonsense” 144-145)

This glimpse is significant in that it opens up space for the reader’s perspective. By drawing attention to the constructed nature of reality, nonsense offers readers the opportunity to question what is presented to them as ‘real.’ Where children’s literature is concerned, I suggest that this dislocation has the potential to expose the subjectivity of the adult creator. By destabilizing the authority of the text/author nonsense might give children a glimpse of the ways adults construct ‘right’ notions of childhood.

This negotiation of language, reality, identity, meaning, and power underlies the ambivalence of literary nonsense. In fact, the most defining feature of nonsense may actually be that it has no specific point (Tigges, Literary Nonsense 257). The messages nonsense conveys are ambiguous, a natural consequence of speaking in contradictions. The ambiguity of nonsense,
however, is not always appreciated for the philosophical and artistic insights it bears. Sewell, for instance, distinguishes nonsense from poetry (193), maintaining that nonsense possesses little beauty and lacks emotion (107, 129). Of course, these latter points, like most others regarding literary nonsense, are not universally agreed upon (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 14). Although Sewell claims that nonsense does not possess beauty, she does acknowledge that it may be one of the child’s pathways to beauty (Sewell, “Nonsense” 148). Alternatively, W. Charlton views nonsense as aspiring to the Kantian notion of beauty (358). In his opinion, nonsense is beautiful in as much as it invites our minds to engage in a sustained state of play and amusement that keeps our imaginative faculties at work.

Regardless of whether or not one views nonsense as beautiful or distinct from poetry, the idea that it has no point needs clarification. Children’s literature, as has already been mentioned, is a tool for socialization. Thus, in as much as nonsense literature teaches readers something about the nature of language, it does have a point. At a semantic level, however, nonsense resists singular interpretations. After all, if we understand “point” to mean the message of a work, nonsense has more than one. Indeed, the confusion nonsense creates arises, not from a lack of meaning, but a surplus of it (Stewart 93; Lecercle 50, 151). Where nonsense is concerned, the possible signifieds far exceed the signifiers, leaving readers to negotiate many meanings instead of one. In its ambiguity, nonsense means different things to different readers. What Lear and Carroll recognize to be pointless, others view as meaningful reflections on language and society.

Nonsense, therefore, subverts its own pointlessness by highlighting the subjective nature of meaning. Even if the nonsense writer’s point in writing nonsense is not to make any sense, this action calls into question the processes by which we make sense, and it is the reader’s reflection on these processes that leads to a meaningful reading experience. This last observation
is important, because nonsense writers like Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson do communicate messages through their work. The fact remains, however, that their play with language opens up a spectrum of possibilities to readers, allowing for a range of interpretations. The seriousness of their message is subverted through the playful and humorous nature of their nonsensical creations. Seen from this perspective, one of the purposes of nonsense literature may be to provide children with opportunities to exercise their imaginations. “Nonsense of every kind,” Charlton notes, “may be composed on purpose, and for more purposes than one” (346). Thus, where the intentions of nonsense writers are concerned, there may be many different motivations (conscious and unconscious) underlying their creations. While Charlton maintains that literary nonsense “is composed not for any ulterior purpose but for its own sake” (346), his statement leaves room for interpretation. Nonsense literature composed for its own sake might mean a range of different things depending on one’s understanding of nonsense. Indeed, if we are to borrow Stewart’s understanding, nonsense is composed for the sake of questioning conceptions of sense, a way of upsetting reality for the purpose of interrogating it.

Still, the question remains: how to incorporate all of these observations surrounding literary nonsense into a single definition? Of all the scholarship to date, I find Wim Tigges’s understanding of the genre to be the most clear. In his comprehensive study of literary nonsense, Tigges bridges some of the above views, while addressing areas of confusion, including the issue of whether or not nonsense is best represented as a device, mode, or genre. When it comes to this issue, one must really consider the level at which the nonsense functions in a text. According to Tigges, nonsense may be perceived as a literary device in as much as it may feature as a small aspect of a work (Literary Nonsense 48). Consequently, the presence of a nonsense device does not necessarily imply that an entire work should be classified as nonsense literature. Nonsensical
devices, Tigges explains, refer more to a nonsensical quality than anything else, much in the same way that the words humorous or comical may be applied to a text (*Literary Nonsense* 48). Nonsense as a *mode*, on the other hand, may be used to describe a *type* of literary nonsense, such as nonsense prose or poetry (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 49). In this study, for instance, I am examining the *mode* of literary nonsense known as *nonsense verse*.

The acknowledgement of nonsense as a device and mode, however, still leaves room for a broader understanding of nonsense as a genre. While the presence of nonsensical devices does not necessarily make an entire text nonsensical, Tigges argues that there exists a certain set of characteristics that distinguishes nonsense literature from other forms. Acknowledging and incorporating the insights of previous scholarship, he narrows the “generic repertoire” of literary nonsense to four basic characteristics: “the tension between meaning and its absence, the creation of reality by means of language, the absence of emotional involvement, and the element of play” (Fowler qtd. in Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 49; Tigges, *Literary Nonsense* 257). For the purposes of this thesis I am adopting Tigges’s definition, as it encompasses those elements of literary nonsense that I wish to address in my analysis of Seuss’s, Silverstein’s, Lee’s, and Lawson’s nonsense poetry. The tension between meaning and its absence speaks to the ambivalence created by nonsense, an ambivalence that relates to discussions surrounding the dynamics of children’s literature, which often attempts to censor and control children’s perceptions of reality. Exclusion, Nodelman observes, is a primary feature of children’s literature; for every piece of information that is included in a text, some ‘adult’ knowledge is left out (*Hidden* 265; 341). Nodelman refers to this information as the adult presence or “shadow text” (*Hidden* 199). Thus, in as much as literary nonsense draws attention to this dialectic of meaning, it may expose the ambivalence of children’s literature.
This particular concern with adult censorship relates well to Tigges’s second characteristic, which is the creation of reality by language. In order to understand how nonsense verse might expose and question the adult presence in children’s literature I must explore the way nonsense draws attention to the arbitrary nature of language and the ways people use it to manipulate perceptions of reality. Only then can I examine the possibility that children’s nonsense poetry highlights the processes through which adults construct and disseminate specific notions of childhood. Admittedly, I am less concerned with Tigges’s third characteristic, the absence of emotional involvement. Still, while I would not go so far as to say the texts I am discussing (particularly Seuss’s) are necessarily devoid of emotion, I do agree that the humor they possess undercuts the presence of emotion. Indeed, this withdrawal from emotion may actually allow for a greater level of detachment in readers, thereby increasing their ability to critically distance themselves from the text and question the messages it contains.

Along with the characteristics already mentioned, Tigges’s fourth defining feature of literary nonsense—the element of play—is extremely relevant to discussions of how nonsense engages readers in a critical negotiation of language. For it is by playing with words that nonsense demonstrates the way they influence our perceptions of reality and ourselves. According to Ede, the play of nonsense “can be both an exploration, a statement of personal freedom, or a withdrawal, an attempt to deny upsetting realities and problems” (59). Again, this ambivalent dialectic is especially relevant to discussions of children’s literature, which is also characterized by its struggle regarding the suppression and concealment of different realities (Nodelman, *Hidden* 210; Nodelman and Reimer 102-103). Play with language, however, allows children to access information and explore the world from different perspectives: “Just as the child’s play in the kitchen teaches him how to use things in the kitchen, so the nonsense which
most children like to read and talk teaches them how to use words and ideas” (Charlton 359). Certainly, play and discovery are related; the play that takes place in nonsense literature is inherently tied to the sense of empowerment it fosters in readers.

As I hope to have shown, Tigges’s framework is useful in defining literary nonsense, especially as it applies to children’s literature. While I adopt his definition of the genre, however, I am still interested in how nonsense functions as a device. Thus, in an effort to accommodate a clearer understanding of the different levels at which nonsense operates, I am turning to Charlton’s definition of the three different kinds of linguistic nonsense: grammatical, logical, and factual (352). According to Charlton, grammatical nonsense occurs when “a sequence of symbols may fail to make sense because it contravenes rules of syntax, or rules of vocabulary, or both” (347). Alternatively, logical nonsense may be seen to express “a combination of thoughts which is logically objectionable,” and factual nonsense takes place when “a person uttering it cannot mean what he says without ignoring plain facts” (Charlton 352). Along with Tigges’s four characteristics, Charlton’s breakdown of nonsense will scaffold my discussion of how nonsense works, for it allows me to identify the different ways nonsense violates conventional aspects of language use.

Establishing these definitions are important, because they distinguish literary nonsense from other art forms. One of the reoccurring problems in nonsense scholarship is the conflation of nonsense with similar modes and genres. Tigges’s understanding of literary nonsense, however, avoids this conflation. Because he maintains that nonsense has no point, he successfully differentiates it from parody, burlesque and satire, which do have a point (Literary Nonsense 257). Also, the four characteristics he identifies distinguish nonsense literature from other forms, including: nursery rhymes, dreams, light verse, fantasy, the grotesque, surrealism,
Dadaism, absurdity, and metafiction. While these various modes contain some components of literary nonsense they do not contain all of them, and are therefore different. Tigges argues that it is the combination of these four elements that is unique to literary nonsense (Literary Nonsense 257).

In addition to Tigges, Linda Shires provides a useful distinction between nonsense, fantasy, and parody that is worth mentioning. These three forms are similar in that they all “explode or transgress the frame of ‘the real’ and thus open up a space of uncertainty” (Shires 267). However, as Shires points out, they accomplish this task differently (268). According to her, “[f]antasy is the mirror that sucks the body in,” whereas, “[p]arody is the placement of distorted mirror image against an ‘original’ mirror image” and “[n]onsense is that which cannot be seen, or known, or held onto: the broken mirror, the broken image” (268). The mirror serves as a useful metaphor in the distinction of these various forms, as it speaks to the mimetic function of fiction and provides a strong illustration of the way fantasy, parody, and nonsense interact differently (independently or simultaneously) with preconceived notions of reality. Shires’s distinctions explain how nonsensical texts like Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) may be perceived as fantasy, parody, and nonsense.

Still, what I like most about Shires’s analysis of these three modes is her mention of the uncertainty they create. For, in many ways, this uncertainty is counter to some of the traditional objectives of children’s literature, which includes the standardization of children’s experiences and behavior (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Shires observes that “[b]y threatening total loss, the modes of fantasy, nonsense, and parody all aim toward a breakdown of linguistic coherence, of a reassuring sense of identity, of known meaning” (273). This uncertain space is somewhat akin to Sewell’s understanding of the glimpse nonsense offers readers, for it leads them to question
“who is justified to name what is to be considered real” (Shires 271). Continuing with Shires’s metaphor, children’s literature may be seen as a two-way mirror, a looking glass that reflects certain understandings of childhood, while hiding the presence of the adult author on the other side. If nonsense shatters this mirror, it reveals the presence of the person behind it—the person who constructed it. By heightening readers’ awareness of a text’s fictionality nonsense leaves them to question their understanding of themselves and whether or not the reflections of childhood they have seen in literature actually correspond with their lived experiences.

This questioning of identity and reality underlies the historical and contemporary relevance of literary nonsense. In his book, Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature (1994), Jean-Jacques Lecercle postulates the reason for the survival of Lear and Carroll’s work. According to him, nonsense “distanc[es] itself from contemporary values, it is not threatened when these vanish or are deeply altered—distance from values, whatever they are, there still is because there always was” (Lecercle 224). Lecercle’s observation is interesting, for it builds on the concept of nonsense as dialectic, as an ongoing conversation for readers. Because nonsense never arrives at a final signified, there is never a final answer to the different questions it poses; it “looks back in nostalgia, but it also looks forward in anticipation” (Lecercle 224). Viewed from this perspective, nonsense represents an open-ended dialogue with past, present, and future cultures. Furthermore, as a counter to social norms, nonsense often “anticipates, and it criticises in advance, the developments of philosophy and linguistics” (Lecercle 224). While this thesis will not delve as deeply into philosophy and linguistics as Lecercle’s work, it will touch briefly on the way 19th and 20th century debates concerning nonsense and children’s literature relate to 21st century concerns regarding child literacy. In this

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respect, I share Lecercle’s understanding of the ways literary nonsense maintains its contemporary relevance.

To better understand the relationship between nonsense literature, language learning, and literacy, I now turn to the scholarship surrounding nonsense and education. So far this introduction has examined literary nonsense from the perspectives of English, Linguistics, and Philosophy. I have provided a general understanding of the literary debates concerning nonsense literature, a working definition of nonsense as a genre, mode, and device, and identified its relevance to contemporary culture and children’s literature. Having clarified the way I am defining literary nonsense in this study, the latter half of this literature review will focus on the scholarship that pertains to its application, specifically that found within the fields of Education and Anthropology. Locating nonsense literature within educational and other social contexts allows me to situate my understanding of children’s nonsense verse within the spheres of its practice, that is, the various areas of its creation and reception.

Indeed, it is only by examining literary nonsense from an interdisciplinary perspective that I can begin to answer the questions and concerns of this study. As has already been mentioned, the scholarship surrounding children’s literature transcends disciplinary boundaries. Thus, while I have divided the body of nonsense scholarship according to what I regard as its two major streams, it is important to keep in mind that such a divide is not an accurate reflection of the way these studies have and continue to engage with each other in actual time. Historically speaking, educational research on nonsense crosses into literary studies, as does philosophy and anthropology. Thus, it is only natural that intersections and trends between the various fields emerge as I discuss the scholarship of the educational theorists and anthropologists that follow.
2.2 Nonsense and Education

Russian poet and scholar Kornei Chukovskii is one of the first researchers to have focused specifically on the relationship between nonsense and children’s learning. In his book, *From Two to Five*, originally published in Russian in 1933 (English trans. 1963), Chukovskii includes a chapter on the educational merits of nonsense verse, what he refers to as “‘rhymed topsy-turvies’” (96). “The Sense of Nonsense Verse” addresses the critics of topsy-turvies who accuse the art form of possessing little to no educational value. In his defense of nonsense verse, Chukovskii identifies a “special function” of its play (98). He observes that the learning child plays as much with ideas as he/she does with actual things (98). The pleasure of nonsense verse, he suggests, lies in the child’s ability to distort the reality that he or she has come to know. According to him, “[t]he more aware the child is of the correct relationship of things, which he violates in his play, the more comical does this violation seem to him” (99). From Chukovskii’s perspective, children’s engagement with nonsense is demonstrative of their successful learning.

Responding to accusations that nonsense distorts children’s understanding of reality, Chukovskii argues that it confirms their knowledge of the way things actually are. He explains that the child’s “main purpose, as in all play, is to exercise his newly acquired skill of verifying his knowledge of things” (Chukovskii 101). Indeed, it is for this reason that Chukovskii contends that nonsense “signifies for the child the successful culmination of mental efforts which he has made to master his concepts of the world around him” (101). Summarizing the educational benefits of nonsense verse, he states:

…for every ‘wrong’ the child realizes what is ‘right,’ and every departure from the normal strengthens his conception of the normal. Thus he values even more highly his firm, realistic orientation. He tests his mental prowess and invariably he passes this test,
which appreciably increases his self-esteem as well as his confidence in his intellectual abilities…(Chukovskiï 102)

One can imagine how important strengthening an organized, “realistic orientation” to reality would have been to adults and educators in Soviet Russia, the audience to which Chukovskiï is writing. And yet, his insights regarding children’s play take into consideration the ways nonsense helps them “not become discouraged in [their] chaotic world” (102). Chukovskiï’s admission that the world is chaotic for children somewhat undermines his earlier assertion that nonsense strengthens a realistic orientation to a naturally ordered reality. For if the world is chaotic, then the notion of it not being so is not very realistic after all. On the contrary, organized reality is something people construct and impose on experience in order to create the illusion that they can achieve a sense of mastery over the world. As children living under a totalitarian regime may very well discover, the idea that one can master reality is an ideology in itself, one that, like all ideas, can and should be played with.

When considered from this perspective, Chukovskiï’s understanding of the ways nonsense strengthens children’s orientations to reality acquires new meaning. Viewed on a more philosophical level, it is possible that reality cannot be mastered, that to believe it can is to pretend and engage in sustained self-deception. From this perspective, nonsense may actually affirm the reality that ‘reality’ resists singular interpretations. Saltman touches on this subject when she writes of the different functions nonsense serves for younger and older children. While she adopts Chukovskiï’s view that nonsense affirms an orderly and factual reality for younger children (i.e., 2-5 yrs), for older children, she states that it is “more than merely a test and confirmation of reality,” for “[o]ut of this playing with the limits of the world can grow a vision of a world with larger boundaries” (Saltman 68). Hence, where mature children are concerned,
the main educational benefit of nonsense appears to be that it reminds readers that understandings of reality are subjective, and that society’s orientation to reality—its way of classifying the ‘correct’ relation of things—is often an inaccurate reflection of one’s actual experience and in need of adjusting.

Returning to Chukovskii’s argument, however, which is limited to the educational benefit nonsense holds for two-to-five-year-old children, one can see how it applies to the scientific exploration of language. Playing with language signifies the learning of it:

When we notice that a child has started to play with some newly acquired component of understanding; we may definitely conclude that those ideas can become toys for him whose proper relation to reality is firmly known to him. (Chukovskii 103)

In other words, before children can play with a concept they have to know it; in order to subvert common sense a child has to be familiar with it. On the basis of this logic, Chukovskii makes the final assessment that “nonsense would be dangerous for children only if it obscured from them the authentic and the real interrelations of ideas and things,” which, he maintains, it does not (104). The true significance of his argument lies in the observation that children’s nonsensical play signifies their knowledge, not their ignorance.

British anthropologists Iona and Peter Opie provide further evidence of the educational value of nonsense in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), a study that chronicles the oral street lore passed down and adapted by generations of England’s children. According to the Opies, these inherited rhymes can be divided into two major classes:

There are those which are essential to the regulation of games and their relationships with each other; and there are those, seemingly almost as necessary to them, which are mere expressions of exuberance: a discordant symphony of jingles, slogans, nonsense verses,
tongue-twisters, macabre rhymes, popular songs, parodies, joke rhymes, and improper verses. (*Lore and Language* 17)

For the purposes of this study, I am concerned with the latter type of rhyme,\(^6\) those “expressions of exuberance” under which nonsense verse is classified. “It is only fitting,” the Opies write, “that in the land which nurtured Lear and Lewis Carroll, and counts them national heroes, the young should carry a certain archive of nonsense verse in their heads” (*Lore and Language* 22). These verses, the Opies observe, are uttered “just for fun,” and yet, they also serve a purpose (*Lore and Language* 18). Underlying children’s play with language is their desire to creatively test its boundaries and functions.

Indeed, whether centuries old or modern creations, adult-authored or child-authored,\(^7\) these seemingly trivial verses are the means by which children negotiate the world around them. They function as both a form of social initiation and self-expression. Speaking of their significance, the Opies write:

> These rhymes are more than playthings to children. They seem to be one of their means of communication with each other. Language is still new to them, and they find difficulty in expressing themselves. When on their own they burst into rhyme, of no recognizable relevancy, as a cover in unexpected situations, to pass off an awkward meeting, to fill a silence, to hide a deeply felt emotion, or in a gasp of excitement. (*Lore and Language* 18)

In these situations, nonsense verse serves as a way to navigate one’s personal experience of reality, as it exists inter-subjectively with others. The rhymes provide children with an alternative

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\(^7\) The Opies observe that children do not create original rhymes as much as they uphold traditional ones. While uttered and adapted by children, the majority of street rhymes are recognizable variants of older rhymes, some of which have existed for centuries. See p. 12.
method of self-expression: “through these quaint ready-made formulas the ridiculousness of life is underlined, the absurdity of the adult world and their teachers proclaimed, danger and death mocked, and the curiosity of language is savoured” (Lore and Language 18). Nonsense verse, the Opies’ observations reveal, is a linguistic medium that allows children to critically engage and reflect on the social processes embedded within language.

As the Opies express in their observations, part of the appeal of nonsense verse is that it provides children with the space to critique and resist adult authority. Because adults have distanced themselves from children’s lore (Opie and Opie, Lore and Language 1), it becomes the perfect outlet for child rebellion. Children’s undermining of adult authority can be seen in nonsensical rhymes like, “I had an Aunt Nellie/ Who had a wooden belly,/ And when I touched it/ Out popped jelly,” that make adults look ridiculous (Opie and Opie, Lore and Language 19).

Nonsense, however, also allows children the space to mock themselves: “it is noticeable that there is no aversion to the first person singular being the centre of the nonsense” (Lore and Language 22). According to the Opies, nonsense verses may be classified as either “nonsense” or “utter nonsense” (Lore and Language 24). Contrary to common perception, “‘utter nonsense’ often seems to be more laboured and self-conscious, although it is just as traditional” (24). The Opies refer to these utterances as “tangletalk,” an example of which would be: “One midsummer’s night in winter/ The snow was raining fast,/ A bare-footed girl with clogs on/ Stood sitting on the grass” (24). This poem effectively illustrates the fascination children have with the incongruities of language, specifically in relation to the possible meanings it can convey. Thus, while the Opies’ study, like Chukovskii’s work, is now somewhat dated, it is nevertheless important to this discussion of nonsense verse because it demonstrates the sustained importance of children’s language play across decades and centuries.
Linda Gibson Geller develops Chukovskii and the Opies’ understanding of nonsense verse and education in her study, *Wordplay and Language Learning for Children* (1985). Having taught and studied wordplay in a variety of elementary classrooms, Geller observes the effect it has on children’s language learning during their different stages of development. Geller divides these stages into three age categories: three to four, five to seven, and eight to eleven. For preschoolers, she, like Chukovskii, notes the ways in which nonsense “confirm[s] how things work by exploring how they don’t” (Geller 41). Geller, however, takes a more comprehensive approach in her analysis of the way “nonsense play represents a specific method for exploring the nature of the language system” (41). Building on the insights of the Opies, she recognizes the ways in which nonsense helps children learn the boundaries of communication. She also points out how nonsense enables children to “explore the poetic resources of the language in their play” (41). This exploration, Geller notes, is aided by the use of patterns in sound. Intonation, rhyme, and rhythm are all a part of the child’s play with words, not to mention the “ritual repetitions of traditional play forms” (41). The literary devices that make up nonsense verse, such as alliteration, assonance, and rhyme, help young language learners develop their literacy skills, as they increase phonological awareness and assist new readers in anticipating words.

Indeed, where reading is concerned, wordplay not only develops children’s basic literacy skills, but also their comprehension. For children between the ages of five and seven, rhymed nonsense verses can open up space for questions:

And because the reading/repeating of familiar verses relieves the beginner of some of the task of discovering what is being said, it can leave him or her freer to consider how it is being said—how, that is, spoken language is represented by print systems. (Geller 47)
The questions relating to this “how” extend to the variability of orthography; wordplay can be used to introduce children to the different spelling exceptions that exist in the English language. “Verse language,” Geller notes, “because it is built upon patterns in sound, can focus children’s attention on multiple relations which govern sound-to-spelling correspondences” (49). Geller references Dr. Seuss stories as a great resource for this kind of wordplay and language learning activity (49). According to her, rhymed verses and the different elements they contain, such as pun and parody, all create an experimental space where children can test the boundaries of language.

As Geller and other scholars have pointed out, part of testing these boundaries involves giving voice to the more seditious aspects of experience. While some educators have refused to introduce nonsense literature into the classroom because of its presumed lack of substance, others have rejected it because of its subversive tendencies. “Many traditional verse forms,” Geller notes, “are used to give expression to what is generally considered socially inexpressible” (56). Discussing these attempts at censorship in the classroom, she observes that the “larger and much more important job is helping youngsters overcome their fear of peoples and customs that differ from the ‘norm,’ defined as the predominant ethnic group in the school population” (Geller 57). Instead of boycotting nonsense verses that contain inappropriate material, Geller suggests that it is important to address their content. Nonsense, she points out, can be used to explore and set boundaries of behavior and exchange in the classroom (57), while providing a means by which to open up conversations of difference.

This more sophisticated lesson in language learning tends to take place in the later grades. Geller notes that between the ages of eight and eleven, “[a] consciousness of the inconsistencies and injustices of society makes its first appearance” (58). Finding an outlet for
this sense of injustice is not always easy for children, who are subject to the authority of adults.

Geller notes:

By this age children have learned that authority is frequently expressed in the defining of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts.’ Accompanying this understanding is an awareness that, as children, they have a low place on the social hierarchy, an awareness for which such ‘subversive’ wordplay might help to compensate. (87)

Children, as Geller’s statement indicates, recognize the ways in which adults exert power over them; they understand and feel the effects of their subjugation and the disenfranchisement that results. “Such an awareness,” Geller remarks, “can provide motivation for a critical evaluation of experience,” especially where social justice issues are concerned (58). The various facets of wordplay, including nonsense and parody, provide children with the opportunity to voice their opinions, a process that involves critically engaging with the texts they read. Nonsense provokes creative and critical thought through the chain of questioning it instigates. In doing so, it invites children to actively reflect on the processes of meaning-making that underlie the foundation of their individual and collective identities, their behavior, and their understanding of the world. Nonsense not only asks them the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions pertaining to language use, but also the ‘who’ questions: Who determines the correct orientation to reality—the correct relationship of things? Who makes the rules?

Like Geller, some of the scholars mentioned in the previous section have commented on the relationship between nonsense and the education system. Lecercle, in particular, remarks on how Lear and Carroll’s nonsense references the school system and critiques Victorian education. He writes:
...nonsense texts are an integral part of a complex Victorian arrangement, or social apparatus, which we will call ‘the School’ for short – an arrangement of spaces (the buildings and grounds), bodies (the scholars and teachers), books (the textbooks), discourses (at the school and about school) and texts... (Lecercle 214)

The school system, Lecercle explains, represents the pastiche of discourses that nonsense draws upon. The subjects that are learnt (e.g. language, mathematics, science, history, geography, literature, politics, religion, philosophy etc.) are all representative of the larger institutions that govern society. Nonsense, he maintains, exists alongside these educational institutions, as an arrangement of utterances. Consequently, it “thrives on the heterogeneity of its component parts; it requires co-presence, not coherence” (219). Indeed, it is this lack of coherence that “provides nonsense with a point of view on the educational institutions which makes it the embodiment of their transversion” (219). According to Lecercle, this transversion in Lear and Carroll’s texts refers to the subversion that takes place through the distorting of Victorian values.

The relationship between nonsense and the school, however, is a complex one, as nonsense both supports and undermines the goals of education upheld by institutions of learning. This paradoxical element of nonsense is the reason Lecercle identifies it as “the locus for the educational dialectics of subversion and support” (219). Nonsense teaches, but it also questions the methodologies by which we are taught. “Nonsense is a metalinguistic genre,” Lecercle notes, “because it has the same goals (but not the same methods) as school education: to teach children the rules of language…and more generally the rules of conduct” (216). While nonsense instructs children about the nature of language, it simultaneously mocks the ways in which information is transmitted to children in schools. An example of such mockery can be seen in the way aspects of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland resemble a Victorian textbook, which, Lecercle reminds us,
contained an assortment of incongruous material (220). Carroll’s *Alice*, he points out, “is everything that a Victorian textbook is not, and everything that it should be, if it took any account of the personality and educational needs of its prospective readers” (220). The dialectic Lecercle describes here, though limited to Victorian nonsense, is of equal importance to conversations surrounding nonsense literature in the 20th and 21st centuries. The issue of boring textbooks and primers, and the inspiration/motivation they spark in writers of nonsense, will be of equal importance when discussing the work of writers like Dr. Seuss.

An interesting observation Lecercle makes in addition to those already mentioned, is the fact that nonsense participates in the arrangement of “the School,” while remaining outside of it. Describing this paradox Lecercle states:

…its exponents are at best marginal members of the institution, at worst totally cut off from it; its privileged readers are not part of the masses of children captured by the institution—Victorian little girls do not usually go to school…and the pedagogic positions that can be derived from nonsense texts can hardly be said to reflect the mainstream Victorian educational practices. (218-219)

Nonsense, in this respect, represents the alienated perspective, the manifested other that encompasses the variety of subjectivities that exist within and outside of the boundaries of society. By answering to the needs and presumed likes of Victorian children (specifically little girls), Carroll’s nonsense advocates for the social misfits who are already disregarded as irrational beings. Nonsense, Lecercle suggests, “addresses those children whom the school still excludes. As such, one could argue that it complements the usual institutions by providing material for home schooling” (220). Given the Opies’ observations about the instructive nature of children’s street verse, it would seem that homeschooling, in the case of nonsense, may not
refer to the home itself as much as it does to those spaces where children feel most at home, where they are able to be themselves. From this perspective, the concept of homeschooling extends to the playgrounds and streets, those places where adults are excluded from the child’s world.

There is more to say on the topic of nonsense and education, especially where each of the nonsense poets in this study is concerned. The relationship between education and empowerment is a recurring theme in the scholarship surrounding Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson, which often addresses the way nonsense verse liberates the child reader. This research will be presented in later chapters. First, comes an exploration of my methodology. Before I can navigate the world beyond zebras and sidewalks, where alligator pies lie at the bottom of the bottom of boxes and the light in the attic is always lit, I must identify the rabbit trail I intend to follow. As the scholarship presented in this literature review has suggested, logic is the gateway to Wonderland. Unlocking the nonsense of these poets requires an explanation of the logic I am employing in my methodological approach to their texts. Therefore, let us proceed to the next chapter without delay. We have a date with Translation Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Children’s Literature Studies…and we do not want to be late.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Having established an outline of the genre of literary nonsense, its relation to children’s literature and educational practices concerning language learning and literacy, it is time to discuss the methodological approach of this thesis. As stated in the first chapter, this study employs aspects of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory in its analysis of how children’s nonsense verse promotes critical reading. In doing so, it follows in the traditions set forth by other scholars, who have linked these theoretical practices to Children’s Literature Studies. Although I will rely primarily on the work of Lawrence Venuti for my understanding of Translation Theory, it will be supplemented by the scholarship of researchers like Maria Nikolajeva, who focus specifically on translation practices as they apply to children’s texts. My use of Postcolonial Theory, on the other hand, will be drawn from Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer’s work, which relates the theoretical framework of colonization to the socializing practices of children’s literature.

To clarify the reasoning behind this theoretical framework, I now address the grounds on which I employ Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory in my analysis of the primary texts. One of the main assumptions underlying children’s literature is that children are different from adults (Nodelman, *Hidden* 142; Nodelman and Reimer 95). If this assumption did not exist there would be no need to distinguish literature for adults from literature for children. The case remains, however, that the genre of children’s literature *does* exist—that the majority of western society accepts the assumed difference between children and adults as real and factual. Indeed, to the extent that children are considered different from adults, they are often thought of as a separate culture altogether (Opie and Opie, *Lore and Language* 2). “The culture of childhood,” writes Mary Ellen Goodman, “—the manner in which children in different societies see
themselves and are seen by adults…has been the subject of a considerable amount of sociological and psychological research” (xi). That commercial industries have adopted this view of childhood and exploited the capitalist opportunities it presents is evident in the marketing campaigns directed at young people. The concept of childhood as a distinct culture is a commodifiable one.

In his discussion of the role the corporation plays in the institution of children’s literature Jack Zipes cites the work of Shirley Steinberg and Joel L. Kincheloe. In *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (1997), Steinberg and Kincheloe explain notions of childhood as “‘[c]orporate cultural pedagogy,’” a pedagogy that is “‘structured by commercial dynamics’” (qtd. in Zipes 33). Zipes reacts against this pedagogy when he writes, “[t]here is no such thing as a children’s culture or children’s realm” (34). Though artificial, this construction of child culture is pervasive: “Since all consumerism is ideologically coded and fosters stereotypical thinking, even the rebellion against it or play with it promotes one-dimensional thinking within an alleged market of opportunities” (Zipes 34). In as much as children’s literature is founded on a one-dimensional view of child culture it encourages stereotypical views of children and childhood. “There never has been a literature conceived by children for children,” Zipes argues, “a literature that belongs to children, and there never will be” (40). I agree with Zipes that it is problematic to view children as belonging to a separate culture, and that children’s literature, as a medium through which this understanding of childhood is disseminated, retains those problems. For this reason I have decided to employ a theoretical framework (i.e., Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory) that will interrogate adult assumptions about childhood by accounting for the way they are constructed in children’s literature.
Accordingly, while I am comparing children’s writers to translators, I am doing so on the basis that society often positions them as such—that according to dominant views of childhood (not my own), the children’s writer is perceived as an interpreter of a distinct culture. Venuti defines translation as “a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation” (17). Explained in this way, the act of literary translation is not all that different from writing for children, in which adult writers interpret and construct images of “child culture” as they imagine it to be based on cultural assumptions about childhood (Nodelman and Reimer 97). “Adults,” Nodelman and Reimer observe, “tend to interpret what children do according to how it differs from what they themselves as adults do” (95). When it comes to writing for children, authors base their stories on their own interpretations of childhood, either as they remember it to be in the past (when they were children), or, as they witness it in the present.

From this perspective, children’s literature can be viewed as an adult translation (i.e., interpretation) of children and their experiences. The adult writer is positioned as the translator and childhood is positioned as the foreign text. The need for this translation, however, lies in the way adults view children and their abilities. For this explanation I turn to Nodelman, who draws on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. Adults, Nodelman observes, “must speak for and about and to children, who are presumed, as Orientals are by Orientalists, to be unable to speak for and about and even (in the form of literary texts, at least) to themselves” (Hidden 164). Because children are viewed as an “unselfconscious culture” (Opie and Opie, Lore and Language 2), a primarily oral and primitive culture, they are not seen as capable of representing themselves. Based on this reasoning, adults adopt the task of interpreting childhood for and to
children. The more adults insist on childhood’s “mysterious otherness—its silence about itself…the more they feel the need to observe yet more, interpret yet further, say yet more” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 165). Children’s literature, therefore, is founded on the belief that children are essentially foreign from adults and unable to articulate this difference for themselves.

From a translation perspective then, children represent both the source text and the target audience of children’s literature. Adults, after all, write children’s literature for children. Upon further investigation, however, this distinction is not so clear. The target audience of children’s literature includes the implied child reader of the author’s imagination, as well as the adults (e.g. parents, family members, educators etc.) who buy the ideas of childhood that the text represents. Indeed, the “first and most influential readers are adult editors and then adult reviewers” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 164). Where actual children are concerned, there may be a portion that readily identifies with the implied reader in the text, but there are also those who do not fit the model of childhood that the implied reader represents (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Thus, while children’s writers may be writing for both children and adults, they are essentially seen as translating from “child” to “adult” culture. They are replacing the lived reality of actual children with an interpretation that relies on adult codes of childhood.

Indeed, to the extent that it enforces these codes of childhood, children’s literature possesses colonizing tendencies. Like most colonizing literature, it encourages children to aspire to mimicry, “to mimic not, in this case, the behavior of the adults themselves but rather the childhood that adults imagine for them” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 186). Underlying children’s literature is the attempt to assimilate children to adult understandings of what it means to be a child. The act of interpreting childhood is therefore inherently related to the act of regulating and controlling it. For this reason, Nodelman and Reimer conclude that children’s literature
“represents an effort by adults to colonize children: to make them feel guilty about or downplay the significance of all the aspects of themselves that inevitably don’t fit the adult model” (97). Nodelman acknowledges that the parallels between the processes of colonization and the socialization that takes place within children’s literature are inexact; however, he maintains that it serves as a useful metaphor for discussion (Hidden 164). Colonial ideology helps map the binary thinking that produces these imbalances of power within a culture (Hidden 164). Indeed, the binary perspective through which society views and classifies childhood and adulthood might very well be symptomatic of the thinking that leads to the domination of one culture by another.

Translation Studies, however, has another term for this process of colonization as it takes place in literature: domestication. Domesticating translations are those in which “the translator substitutes familiar phenomena and concepts for what may be perceived as strange and hard to understand” (Nikolajeva 409). Venuti refers to this act of domestication as “ethnocentric violence,” for in its aim towards fluency it produces the “illusion of transparency,” which makes it so the text “masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values” (21). Like domesticating translations, children’s literature aspires to a kind of fluency in its attempt to present middle-class, adult constructions of childhood as authoritative representations of children’s lived realities. Together, these adult representations generate a standard of childhood that Nodelman and Reimer refer to as, “the tyranny of the norm” (97). This norm creates an illusion of transparency by claiming to be an accurate reflection of childhood. Adult writers “present the images they have constructed in children’s literature to persuade children that their lives are actually as adults imagine them to be” (Nodelman and Reimer 97). The illusion, of course, lies in
the realization that there is no singular, universal reality for children, because every child’s experience of the world is different.

To better understand this concept of fluency and the process of domestication it represents, one has to consider the ways in which children’s literature hides the fact that it is an adult interpretation of childhood. For the most part, a children’s text may be considered fluent in its promotion of normative understandings of childhood that correspond to adult perceptions of children. Because these adult perceptions are presented as accurate, they disguise the adult subjectivity of the author as objective truth. While children may very well possess an awareness of the adult author and the text’s fictional status, they nevertheless are asked to accept the authority of the author and his or her understanding of childhood. In this way, children’s texts:

[Int]vite readers to realize that the narrator is the product of the adult’s imagining, to accept the truthfulness of the adult’s imagining, and, in the very act of acceptance, to acknowledge their own inability to imagine themselves and their own childishness so well. (Nodelman, Hidden 212)

As Nodelman demonstrates, the genre of children’s literature tends to hide the fact that the concept of childhood it presents is an adult interpretation, not a natural representation (i.e., source text). Consequently, in so far as children’s texts hide this adult subjectivity they may be viewed as domesticating, because in their efforts to capture the ‘essence’ of children’s experience they assimilate children (i.e., the foreign text) to fit the standards of adult culture.

There is, however, a second translation strategy that opposes the principles of the first and is of especial interest to this study: foreignization. “Foreignizing translation,” Venuti explains, “signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language” (20). By upsetting the norms of the target culture,
foreignizing translation draws attention to the mediated nature of the text, for it reminds readers that they are reading a translation, or, more importantly, an interpretation. Unlike domesticating translations, in which “the translator works to make his or her work ‘invisible,’ producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems ‘natural,’ i.e., not translated” (Venuti 5), foreignizing translations highlight the presence and subjectivity of the translator. The purpose of this translation strategy is to remind readers that translation is a political and cultural act that is influenced by a specific set of social conditions, all of which are filtered through the subjectivity of the translator.

Foreignizing translation is of interest to this study because it bears a similarity to the practice of literary nonsense. Like literary nonsense, foreignization underscores the arbitrary and subjective nature of language by estranging readers from the standardized forms of language use they are accustomed to. This estrangement can occur at the level of syntax and semantics; translators create foreignizing texts by including strange content, questioning cultural assumptions, deviating from the standard dialect, or disrupting grammar. In foreignizing translations:

Neither the foreign writer nor the translator is conceived as the transcendent origin of the text, freely expressing an idea about human nature or communicating it in transparent language to a reader from a different culture. Rather, subjectivity is constituted by cultural and social determinations that are diverse and even conflicting, that mediate any language use, and that vary with every cultural formation and every historical moment.

(Venuti 24)

Foreignization, in other words, reveals the ways in which perceptions of meaning and reality are part of a cultural negotiation. Nonsense literature, as we learned in the previous chapter, achieves
this same revelation in its questioning of common sense. Nonsense writers question the origin of truth that resides in adult logic. In doing so, they thereby subvert their own authority as adult authors, just as the foreignizing translator subverts his or her authority as an expert on a foreign text/culture. Accordingly, in its deviation from cultural norms nonsense may be viewed as foreignizing, for it alerts readers to the ideological nature of language and reminds us that words can and are used to manipulate our understanding of the world.

If extended, this comparison between nonsense and foreignization might produce further correlations. Just as foreignizing translations make visible the presence of the translator, so does nonsense literature potentially make visible the presence of the adult writer. Nodelman refers to this presence as the “hidden adult” (*Hidden* 206). Similar to the domesticating translations that sublimate the presence of the translator and the conditions under which he or she is working, children’s literature also conceals the conditions of its creation:

> What texts of children’s literature might be understood to sublimate or keep present but leave unsaid is a variety of forms of knowledge—sexual, cultural, historical—theoretically only available to and only understandable by adults. (Nodelman, *Hidden* 206)

Because children’s literature is understood in terms of its difference from adult literature it cannot exist apart from what it is not. “The unconscious of a text of children’s literature,” Nodelman explains, “is the adult consciousness that makes its childlikeness meaningful and comprehensible” (*Hidden* 206). In its deviation from conventional children’s literature, however, literary nonsense may actually encourage readers’ awareness of the adult writer’s presence. Given the similarities between nonsense and foreignization, it is quite possible that nonsense literature draws attention to this adult consciousness by rendering the subjectivity of the author
visible and questioning the very medium (i.e., language) through which that subjectivity is expressed.

The parallels between foreignization and literary nonsense can also be seen in the kinds of reading they promote. According to Venuti, “[t]he notion of foreignization can alter the way translations are read as well as produced” (24). This alteration originates in the way foreignization “assumes a concept of human subjectivity that is very different from the humanist assumptions underlying domestication” (24). Foreignizing translations focus on the translator’s mediation of the foreign text, the way in which he or she undertakes the task of subjectively relaying it, according to or not according to, the canons, taboos, codes and ideologies of the target-language culture. Thus, in as much as it disrupts any attempt at fluency, foreignization promotes a different method of reading, one that Venuti describes as “symptomatic” (25). Symptomatic reading:

locates discontinuities at the level of diction, syntax or discourse that reveal the translation to be a violent rewriting of the foreign text, stressing intelligibility, transparent communication, the use value of the translation in the target-language culture, at once dependent on and abusive of domestic values. (Venuti 25)

Nonsense, of course, does all of these things in its exploitation and violation of the rules that govern language use. In their play with language, nonsense writers locate the discontinuities and ambiguities found within different word sounds, meanings, and linguistic situations. Furthermore, nonsense, like foreignizing translation, violates and relies on domestic values in its reversal of common sense. Therefore, it too, promotes a kind of reading that includes an awareness and analysis of the conditions underlying the text’s formation.
Critical theory has another term for this analytical mode of reading: critical literacy. Current understandings of critical literacy are influenced by the work of educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who “described a pedagogy that potentially humanizes, liberates, and develops critical consciousness among oppressed peoples for the purpose of liberation” (Kinnucan-Welsch 240). Rita Roth links Freire’s pedagogy with her analysis of the way Seuss’s nonsense develops children’s literacy skills. “Critical literacy,” she writes, “entails reflection—connecting the printed text to our personal experience and prior knowledge. It entails relating the meanings evoked by a text to the practical world; questioning, confirming, rejecting” (Roth 150). As Roth points out, critical literacy involves more than decoding language, for it operates on a deeper understanding of the way language constructs different ideologies that influence the way we view the world. In this respect, it departs from “domesticating education, which leads to functional literacy and productivity, as defined by the current power and class structures” (Kinnucan-Welsch 240). Under domesticating forms of education children are not encouraged to critically question the information they are given or the texts that they read, but rather, they “accept that knowledge is found in books” (Kinnucan-Welsch 240). In its questioning of the knowledge found in translated books, symptomatic reading can thus be seen as a form of critical literacy, for it empowers readers with an understanding of the historical, sociological, and political motivations that inform the text.

As I hope to have shown here, the correspondences between Translation Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Children’s Literature Studies provide an interesting and informative method through which to consider literary nonsense. The intersections between understandings of domesticating/foreignizing translations and colonizing children’s literature/nonsense literature, not to mention the similarities between the invisible translator and the hidden adult,
offer a framework through which to analyze if and how literary nonsense questions the assumptions adults make about children. At the same time, it also accounts for the ways in which nonsense potentially disrupts the colonizing agenda of children’s literature by drawing attention to the subjectivity of the adult writer. Foreignizing translations, Venuti observes, “are equally partial in their interpretation of the foreign text, but they tend to flaunt their partiality instead of concealing it” (34). The exposure of this partiality explains how nonsense writers can liberate child readers from adult authority. An anti-authoritarian message is not enough; in order to truly free children from adult control children’s nonsense writers have to subvert their own authority as adults. Like foreignizing translations, nonsense literature might accomplish this task by drawing attention to the authors’ subjectivity, which makes the adult writers’ partiality intelligible to the child reader.

On a more basic level, the value of this method lies in its consideration of the historical, social, cultural, and political factors underlying language use. Any discussion of nonsense involves a detailed analysis of the ways it violates the grammatical structures and semantics of language. Likewise, any study of children’s literature involves a consideration of the ways in which adults use language to socialize children. In Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction (1992) John Stephens notes that, “the intelligibility which a society offers its children is a network of ideological positions, many of which are neither articulated nor recognized as being essentially ideological” (8). Translation Theory provides a way of addressing this issue of intelligibility as it exists in the genre of children’s literature, for it reminds us that:

Textual production may be initiated and guided by the producer, but it puts to work various linguistic and cultural materials which make the text discontinuous, despite any
appearance of unity, and which create an unconscious, a set of unacknowledged conditions that are both personal and social, psychological and ideological. (Venuti 24)

Contrary to popular belief, literary nonsense invites intelligibility; through processes of foreignization it invites children to confront the artificiality of child culture and form their own interpretations of what it means to be a child. There is, in other words, method to the madness.

And now that my method has been established, let our exploration of the madness begin.
Chapter 4: Finding the Hidden Adult: Playing Hide and Seek with Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein

This study of nonsense verse begins south of the border with the work of American children’s poets Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein. Examining a selected sample of their work, as rationalized in the introduction, I apply the theoretical lenses of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory in a close reading of their poetry. The objectives of this chapter are to:

1) Determine if and how Seuss and Silverstein’s nonsense verse is foreignizing;
2) Consider the effect this potential foreignization does/does not have on the visibility of the hidden adult in children’s literature.

Meeting these objectives involves examining each primary text and identifying the ways it does or does not depart from the conventional norms of traditional children’s literature. Doing so requires that I synthesize the vocabularies surrounding literary nonsense (i.e., Tigges; Charlton; Shires; Sewell; etc.) and foreignizing translation (Venuti). Accordingly, in my analysis, I will a) outline the way each text is nonsensical and b) explain how this nonsense may or may not be estranging for readers, and thus resemble a foreignizing writing strategy.

At the same time, I will also consider how this foreignization strategy does or does not invoke the adult “shadow texts” Nodelman describes as characteristic of children’s literature (200). Upon identifying any nonsensical/foreignizing aspects of each text I will c) reflect on how these elements might illuminate the writer’s presence and d) how they might also allude to and encourage children’s awareness of the ‘forbidden’ topics of children’s literature, effectively reminding them that ‘childhood,’ as it appears in children’s books, is an adult translation (i.e., interpretation) of children’s lived experiences.
In my analysis I will therefore be referencing the implied readers of each text. The term “implied reader” originates from reader response criticism, having been used by such theorists as Wolfgang Iser “to denote the hypothetical figure of the reader to whom a given work is designed to address itself” (Baldick 166). Where children’s literature is concerned, the implied reader is most often a child. An implied reader, however, may also be seen as an ideal reader, someone “who has the particular attitudes (moral, cultural, etc.) appropriate to that text in order for it to achieve its full effect” (Baldick 166). Literary nonsense, for example, presupposes a reader that can recognize the way it departs or subverts cultural norms. From a translation perspective, this implied reader may be viewed as the target reader. Consequently, part of my study of these potentially foreignizing nonsense texts involves considering the implied readers they invoke.

Before we enter into our examination of Seuss and Silverstein’s work, I would like to mention that the poems selected were chosen to provide a range of each writer’s poetry. Just as On Beyond Zebra! and I Can Read with My Eyes Shut! offer readers a sample of Seuss’s longer, more complex narratives in combination with his shorter, simpler ones, so does the sample of poems from Where the Sidewalk Ends, A Light in the Attic, and Runny Babbit, offer readers a sense of the variety to be found in Silverstein’s collections. While I am unable to discuss each writer’s body of work in its entirety, I hope that this examination will spark more discussion about their poetry.

As a final note, I would also like to state that while this thesis focuses primarily on written nonsense, my discussion of Seuss’s picture books requires that I acknowledge the way his illustrations interact with his text. Although Silverstein’s poetry is also illustrated, his isolated verses do not depend on the interaction between text and image to the extent that Seuss’s rhymed
narratives do. Nevertheless, I make a point of addressing the illustrations that do inform his poetry in interesting ways.

4.1 Dr. Seuss

4.1.1 On Beyond Zebra!

Beginning this study’s exploration of children’s nonsense verse is Dr. Seuss’s 1955 picture book, On Beyond Zebra!. In an effort to answer the question of whether or not Seuss’s nonsense exposes the hidden adult presence in children’s literature, we have to first consider the ways it might be foreignizing. On Beyond Zebra! presents us with an excellent introduction to Seuss’s work and this examination of nonsense verse, because it highlights the link between language and imagination, as well as the role education plays in children’s understanding of the relationship between them. Set in an empty classroom, the story tells the tale of two boys, one of whom has just learned the alphabet. The narrative begins:

Said Conrad Cornelius o’Donald o’Dell, / My very young friend who is learning to spell:

/ ‘The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear. / The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare. / The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat. / I know all the twenty-six letters like that…’

(Seuss, Zebra)\(^8\)

At opening glance, this passage appears fairly straightforward. In terms of content, the story makes logical and factual sense: there is a boy who is learning to read. Stylistically, however, there are some elements that draw the reader’s attention to the author’s language use. The alliteration of Conrad Cornelius o’Donald o’Dell’s very long name, for instance, exaggerates the

\(^8\) *On Beyond Zebra!* © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
strangeness of word sounds and naming practices. Amplifying the strangeness of the boy’s pretentious name is the fact that the narrator is anonymous, and remains so throughout the story.

Also drawing attention to Seuss’s language use is his play with punctuation. This play is apparent in the lower case “o” used to spell Conrad’s last name. One of the first rules children learn when they begin to write is that names should be capitalized. Consequently, such a deviation is interesting in the context of this passage, because it not only subverts the literacy practices Conrad is being taught, but also highlights the standardized effect such instruction is having on his speech. Whereas the lower case spelling of his name appears original, the basic and recognizable syntax of the lines “A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear” makes it sound as if Conrad’s words have come straight from a conventional alphabet book. The contrived nature of his speech suggests that the boy has memorized the linguistic associations instead of actually learning the principles that underlie them. Contrary to the impression he is trying to give, his knowledge appears limited. Conrad may know “all” the letters of the alphabet, but he only knows them in a singular, unimaginative capacity.

Still, more important to this discussion of the hidden adult is that this interplay of standard and nonstandard text distinguishes the voices of the two child characters. The narrator’s voice, unlike Conrad’s, is not standard; his is the portion of the text that deviates from the pedantic. Coincidentally, he is the older of the two. Conrad is his “very young friend who is learning to spell” (Seuss, Zebra). The fact that the narrator’s voice is older and wiser is the first indication that it belongs to the adult writer. And yet, complicating this notion is the illustration of the two boys. Conrad is pictured as a miniature adult—a teacher-like figure in sweater and tie

9 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
with slicked back hair. The narrator, on the other hand, is portrayed as somewhat slovenly. Although taller, he is a rebellious figure, with an un-tucked red shirt and spiky hair. Combined, illustration and text thus create the impression that there are two adult voices masquerading as child characters. Each boy represents a different educational approach to language.

![Image of children and a blackboard with letters](image)

**Figure 1 (Seuss, Dr. On Beyond Zebra!: New York: Random House, 1955).**

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By creating this dichotomy in the opening of his book, Seuss essentially sets up the dialectic structure for the nonsense to come. The next few pages firmly establish the tension of order and disorder\(^{10}\) between the two characters. While Conrad ends his boast by stating: “So now I know everything anyone knows / From beginning to end. From the start to the close. /

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\(^{10}\) In this respect, Seuss’s nonsense models the order-disorder dialectic Sewell describes as a key feature of literary nonsense (*Nonsense* 46).
Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes, the narrator contradicts him (Seuss, Zebra). He responds:

‘In the places I go there are things that I see / that I never could spell if I stopped with the Z. / I’m telling you this ’cause you’re one of my friends. / My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!’ (Seuss, Zebra)

The narrator’s response to Conrad creates a preface for his nonsense. He is speaking in English and the book is written using the English alphabet, so it seems impossible that his alphabet can begin where Conrad’s ends. Logically speaking, one would have to be dependent on the other. Either that, or the different alphabets would have parallel beginnings, just as different languages have their own letters/characters. Japanese, for example, does not begin where French ends. Consequently, the narrator’s alphabet must be nonsensical, because it implies a subversion of the rules governing the English language. The boy is adding his own letters to the previous twenty-six. The rebelliousness inherent to this act is emphasized by the color of his new letter, which, unlike Conrad’s twenty-six white letters, appears in red zig-zag lines.

From a Translation Studies perspective, the narrator’s rebellion against English language norms is foreignizing. Foreignizing translation, Venuti notes, involves “deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience” (20). In terms of its foreignizing strategy, Seuss’s nonsense alienates readers in a way that underscores his manipulation of the text; it “make[s] the translator more visible” (Venuti 17). Simply put, the narrator’s unconventional alphabet reminds readers that Seuss is using language to construct a fictional story about a

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11 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
12 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
fictional alphabet. Foreignization, in this respect, is strongly associated with the self-reflexive/metafictive quality that Ede (57) and Stewart (50) identify in their studies of literary nonsense. This reflexivity becomes more apparent as the narrator describes his invented alphabet: “My alphabet starts with this letter called YUZZ. / It’s the letter I use to spell Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz” (Seuss, Zebra). These lines are self-reflexive for a number of reasons. The nonsense letter “YUZZ” is foreignizing, not only because it looks different from Standard English letters, but also because, as the rhyme emphasizes, it sounds different. And yet, even more estranging is the realization that the narrator’s letter resembles a combination of English letters. The illustrated letter looks very much like a Y conjoined with two Zs. This resemblance is further emphasized through the phonetic spelling of the letter, which appears on the page as “YUZZ.”

Figure 2 (Seuss, Dr. On Beyond Zebra!. New York: Random House, 1955)

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13 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
This self-reflexive aspect of Seuss’s nonsense reveals itself again in the second line when the narrator uses “YUZZ” to spell “Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz.” The reader has to adjust to the idea of a letter looking like a word. There is a reversal here; instead of a letter representing a word as in Conrad’s “A is for ape” statement, words are being used to represent letters. Readers are left to wonder what letters “a,” “ma,” and “Tuzz” signify. Meanwhile, they can identify six different English letters embedded within these unfamiliar letters: y, u, z, a, m, and t. Also foreignizing is the playful and arbitrary use of capitalization taking place. While the letter “YUZZ” is all capitalized, the word “Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz” has both lower and upper case letters. There does not seem to be any logical reason for the “T” in “Tuzz” to be capitalized while “a” and “ma” are left in lower case. English nouns are often capitalized if they are names, which could explain why the “Y” is capitalized. However, if “YUZZ” is supposed to represent a letter, then there is no reason why the whole word “YUZZ” is not capitalized in “Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz.” Following the capitalization rule, it should read “YUZZ-a-ma-tuzz.”

All of these elements highlight Seuss’s own manipulation of language within his text. His linguistic play exposes the arbitrary nature of written communication. While his inconsistent punctuation and orthography highlight the seemingly random nature of grammar, his repeated association of familiar letter sounds with unfamiliar letter signs emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between sound and symbol. The narrator’s foreignizing letters, which he uses to represent fictional creatures, draw attention to the subjective affiliation between symbols and their signified meanings. The subjectivity of this relationship is stressed through the nonsensical makeup of the imagined creatures. The letter “UM,” for example, represents a type of cow called “Umbus” that “has ninety-eight faucets that give milk quite nicely. / Perhaps ninety-nine. I forget
just precisely” (Seuss, *Zebra*). Logically and factually, readers know that such a creature does not exist. At a semantic level, they are aware that the narrator’s fiction does not accurately reflect the reality they experience, in which cows do not have “ninety-eight faucets” but four teats. Here they see how language can be used to distort perceptions of reality. At the same time, they are also confronted with the notion that language can be used to represent unknown or alternative realities to those experienced.

Of course, as the narrator’s somewhat familiar letters and creatures suggest, the boundaries between these realities are not that clear. Ideas and beliefs that appear nonsensical to one person may not appear nonsensical to another. This idea is expressed often throughout the book and can be seen in the narrator’s statement: “So, on beyond Zebra! / Explore! / Like Columbus! / Discover new letters! / Like WUM is for Wumbus” (Seuss, *Zebra*). Seuss’s reference to Columbus is important within the context of the narrator’s invitation, because it reminds readers that new discoveries can change perceptions of nonsense. The myths surrounding the famous explorer, while inaccurate, celebrate the idea that he was the first person to believe and prove that the world was/is round, an idea that, at one time appeared nonsensical. Columbus, however, while known for his discoveries, is equally famous for his errors. Upon sighting North America, he mistook it for India and proceeded to make a lot of harmful misjudgments about its peoples. In this respect, he presents a strong example of how language can be used to *colonize* others. Seuss’s reference thus presents a mixed message: personal

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14 *On Beyond Zebra!* © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
15 *On Beyond Zebra!* © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
creativity must be encouraged, but also checked. Underlying the text is the understanding that language and the ideas it generates can be both constructive and destructive.

This is the point in *On Beyond Zebra!* where we uncover some of the internal and external tensions Ede describes as characteristic of literary nonsense (57). We have already seen how the dialectic between Conrad and the narrator establishes two opposed views towards language, one seemingly straightforward and the other nonsensical. And yet, the narrator, who is supposedly more mature and possesses more authority than the younger boy, is quite convinced of the legitimacy of his alphabet. In fact, he is so convinced that he strives to teach Conrad the ‘correct’ way to approach language, by converting him to his own perspective. In this respect, he actually resembles the absent adult teacher he appears to be rebelling against. Indeed, the dialectic between the two boys, their different positions and viewpoints, highlights the tension of the relationships that exist between teacher and student, writer and reader, and child and adult. At different moments the narrator occupies all of these roles. The ambivalence of the story is created through the juxtaposition of these binary positions, which point to the subjective nature of lived experience. Reality, the narrator demonstrates to Conrad, is inseparable from imagination. The language we use is an imaginative construct that affects the way we interpret our experience. Accordingly, the presence and absence of meaning associated with Seuss’s nonsense is rooted in the subjectivity it invokes. The alphabet being relayed, while nonsensical to some people, has meaning for the narrator, who believes in the world he has created. What adults view as nonsense, children may view as completely rational, and vice versa. By extension, what Seuss views as an important language lesson, others might view as pure ridiculousness.

16 One of Tigges’s four characteristics that make up the generic repertoire of literary nonsense (*Literary Nonsense* 257).
The ambiguity created by this ambivalence is important, because it highlights the parallels between Standard English (i.e., the language that makes sense) and Seuss’s made-up language (i.e., the language of nonsense). Both are essentially shown to be the subjective creations of human minds. The second, however, unlike the first, openly acknowledges the presence of this subjectivity. Whereas Conrad thinks that because he has learned all twenty-six letters he knows “everything anyone knows / from beginning to end. From the start to the close,” the narrator’s statements are open-ended (Seuss, *Zebra*). He qualifies his declarations by emphasizing his subjectivity. The repeated “I” pronoun in phrases like, “In the places I go there are things that I see / That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z,” or, “most people stop at the Z / But not me!,” emphasizes the personal and individual nature of his imagined world (Seuss, *Zebra*). Unlike Conrad, he does not want to be like everyone else. Because his statements are open-ended, they are an invitation; the narrator invites his friend into his world through rhetorical statements like, “When you go beyond Zebra, / Who knows..? / There’s no telling / What wonderful things / You might find yourself spelling!” (Seuss, *Zebra*). Herein lies the major difference between the educational approaches represented by Conrad and the narrator. One involves a *prescriptive* approach to language, the other a *descriptive* approach. Instead of telling children about language and having them memorize its rules, Seuss shows them how it works as a creative sign system of unlimited possibilities.

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18 *On Beyond Zebra!* © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
19 *On Beyond Zebra!* © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
The idea that language presents an unlimited number of creative opportunities is stressed throughout the book. The galloping rhythm of Seuss’s rhymed verse drives forth this concept, pushing the reader on to new ideas and discoveries. Seuss’s narrator introduces Conrad to nineteen new letters: “YUZZ, WUM, UM, HUMPH, FUDDLE, GLIKK, NUH, SNEE, QUAN, THNAD, SPAZZ, FLOOB, ZATZ, JOGG, FLUNN, ITCH, YEKK, VROO, [and] HI” (Seuss, Zebra). Like much literary nonsense, there is a gesture towards infinity (Stewart 116) in the production of ideas generated by this play with language: the possibilities are endless. Most imperative though, is Seuss’s acknowledgement of the role individual subjectivity plays in language use. Foreignizing translations, Venuti notes, “flaunt their partiality instead of concealing it” (34). Only by privileging the subjective nature of language does Seuss avoid falling into the domesticating (i.e., didactic) trap of other children’s writers. Instead of merely substituting one ideological view of language in favor of another, he encourages his readers to think for themselves and come up with their own ideas about it. By the end of the text Conrad is no longer a passive consumer of language; he does not memorize the narrator’s alphabet. In fact, the end of the story mirrors its start. Picking up where the narrator’s alphabet ends Conrad is pictured on the final page drawing his own letter—the biggest and most elaborate yet. The narrator observes: “NOW the letters he uses are something to see! / Most people still stop at the Z… / But not HE!” (Seuss, Zebra). In this respect, Seuss’s narrative models the engagement he hopes to achieve with his readers. He does not want them to be passive recipients, but rather, active participants in the reading process.

20 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
21 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
This invitation to engage with the text is made explicit at the end of the book, where the self-reflexive aspect of Seuss’s story reaches its climax. The final pages include an appendix that is introduced by the words: “List of Letters for People who Don’t stop at Z…” (Seuss, Zebra).\textsuperscript{22} This is the moment when the narrator and Seuss’s subjectivity are truly aligned. The story has ended, and yet, the voice continues. The presence of the additional text and the absence of the illustrated character leave readers to conclude that it can only be the author speaking. Turning the page, they find themselves officially stepping into the role of Conrad; like him they are

\textsuperscript{22} On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
embarking on the journey beyond Z. After perusing the nineteen nonsensical letters for the second time, Seuss leads them beyond the new alphabet to one more letter—Conrad’s letter—accompanied by the words: “…what do YOU think we should call this one, anyhow?” (Seuss, Zebra). This final act invokes the child reader’s subjectivity; Seuss acknowledges his audience by directly addressing them. Consequently, they are left to identify with the empowered Conrad.

Figure 4 (Seuss, Dr. On Beyond Zebra! New York: Random House, 1955)

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In terms of his hiding then, this is the moment when Seuss says, “BOO!” Presenting children with a linguistic symbol and asking their opinion of it in capital letters, he admits his role as creator/mediator of the text. At the same time, he simultaneously delegates this role to the

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23 On Beyond Zebra! © 1955, renewed 1983 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
child, who is left to interpret the last symbol. *On Beyond Zebra!*, it seems, is a training exercise in finding the subjectivity embedded in language. Seuss teaches his readers how to play hide and seek with the ideas presented to them in books, by helping them look beyond the words on the page to the minds that created them—including his own.

4.1.2 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*

Seuss elaborates on this notion of linguistic hide and seek in one of his later books, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* (1978). The book is one of Seuss’s Beginner Books, the series launched by Random House in the wake of *The Cat in the Hat’s* (1957) enormous success. These books, with their limited vocabulary, are specifically designed for beginning readers, initially intended as a substitute for the less imaginative Dick and Jane readers used in schools (Goodman qtd. in Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). Like *On Beyond Zebra!*, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* deals specifically with issues of language learning. The book opens with the Cat in the Hat addressing a smaller version of himself, whom he later refers to as “Young cat” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*).

Similar to the two boys in *On Beyond Zebra!*, the older Cat serves as the voice of the narrator, who is imparting wisdom to his younger friend. Once again, this dialectic between older and younger characters models the relationship between Seuss and his reader.

As in *On Beyond Zebra!*, the foreignization Seuss employs in the early pages of his narrative is subtle. Grammatically, logically, and factually, all of his statements make sense. The cat declares: “I can read in red. / I can read in blue. / I can read in pickle color too” (Seuss, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.)
Stylistically, the colorization and increased font size of the words “red,” “blue,” and “pickle color,” emphasize the metafictional element of the text. Like the older cat, readers are also reading in red, blue, and pickle color. By having these words deviate from the rest, Seuss intentionally creates a foreignizing effect, because he draws readers’ attention to the fact that they are reading a book. This metafictive play continues on through the next few pages, where Seuss has readers “read in a circle and upside down” by placing his sentence in a circle (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). However, it is not until the older cat states: “I can read / Mississippi / with my eyes shut tight!” that the true nonsense begins. The statement is a form of factual nonsense. Readers are aware that in order to read the words in Seuss’s book they have to have their eyes open to see them. Even blind people have to see with their hands. The idea that a person can observe and decode information without the use of his or her senses is foreignizing because it goes against what we know to be true.

And yet, while factually unsound, the idea of pretending to read is quite familiar. The cat is performing a tactic often used by children who are in the process of learning written language. Indeed, his demonstration of reading with his eyes shut resembles the way a child might recite words from memory to hide the fact that he or she is unable to decode written text. This recitation strategy is further emphasized by the choice of words the cat chooses to read with his eyes closed. “Mississippi, Indianapolis, and Hallelujah” are all long and difficult words for children learning to spell, but exactly the kinds of words they like to memorize (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*).

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25 I Can Read with My Eyes Shut! © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
26 I Can Read with My Eyes Shut! © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
27 There is a rhyme associated with the spelling of the word Mississippi: “M-i-s-s-i-p-p-i” (bolded letters stand for stressed syllables).
By selecting them as examples, Seuss strengthens the correlation between *reading with eyes shut* and *reading from memory*. The words themselves are multisyllabic and somewhat arbitrary, which, not only make them fun to say, but underscores the strange sounds associated with language. Undercutting readers’ potential fun of reading these words with their eyes shut, however, is the cat’s exclamation that, “it’s bad for my hat / and makes my eyebrows get red hot. / so…reading with my eyes shut / I don’t do an awful lot” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). From a logical standpoint there is no reason why reading with one’s eyes shut would be bad for one’s hat. Seuss thus employs the foreignizing statement as a way of opening readers’ eyes to his manipulation of the text.

Indeed, the more Seuss discusses the notion of reading with one’s eyes shut, the more he attempts to open readers’ eyes and minds through his use of nonsense. The rest of the narrative consists of the cat listing off various things people can see if they read with their eyes open. In true nonsense fashion, not all of these items are that spectacular. In fact, a number of them are quite ordinary. The cat tells us we can “read about trees… / and bees… / and knees” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). The eye opener comes from the bizarre combination of these everyday items. According to the cat, readers with their eyes open can read about “knees on trees. / And bees on threes” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). In this way, Seuss takes the familiar and transforms it into the unfamiliar.

We are used to seeing trees, bees, and knees, but we are not used to seeing knees on trees or bees

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28 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
29 As Sewell and other scholars have noted, nonsense has a tendency to play with everyday objects (Tigges, *Literary Nonsense*, 14).
30 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
31 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
on threes. Continuing in this foreignizing speech pattern, the cat states: “You can read about anchors. / And all about ants. / You can read about ankles. / And crocodile pants” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). Here Seuss plays with the notion of order. Anchors, ants, and ankles all seem quite basic and rather unexciting things to learn about. The introduction of “crocodile pants” into the mix, however, creates a sense of chaos. The internal logic of the list, whether it is to represent words that begin with “a,” or things that actually exist, is completely overturned. This subversion of ordered reality is potentially what Seuss means when he describes his work as “logical insanity” (Pease 517). The juxtaposition of rational and irrational statements attempts to keep readers’ minds engaged.

To be sure, there is a carefully crafted balance in Seuss’s work between that which makes sense and that which does not. In addition to real items like “hoses” and “roses” there are also nonsensical creatures like “Foo-Foo the Snoo” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). The tensions created by this order-disorder dialectic manifest in the relationship between text and picture. Readers are told that reading with their eyes open means that they can learn about things like “mice on ice” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). While this statement is not improbable, the image that accompanies it, which showcases mice ice skating, is. By providing this visual information Seuss extends the concept of reading with one’s eyes open to illustrations. Decoding images, he demonstrates, is just as important as decoding words. This point is emphasized by the illustration of the cat when he states: “There are / so many things / you can learn about. / BUT…you’ll miss / the best things

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34 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
/ if you keep your eyes shut" (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). The narrating cat, who is pictured walking off to the right of the page, is followed by a gigantic nonsensical creature. This creature, which is unmentioned in the text, would not be visible if it were not for the illustration. Consequently, by including it in the illustration, Seuss increases the relevance of the cat’s statement to readers’ own experience of the text. If they do not have their eyes open to the different communicative modes within his book, they will miss out on important information.

![Illustration from Dr. Seuss's *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*](image)

**Figure 5** (Seuss, Dr. *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*. New York: Random House, 1978).

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35 *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* © 1978, by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
Another way Seuss attempts to open readers’ eyes to his presence is through his grammatical play with language. At one point the cat states, “You can learn about SAD…/ and GLAD…/ and MAD!” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). In these lines Seuss engages in what Charlton would describe as grammatical nonsense (347). The words “sad, glad, and mad” are all adjectives, and yet, the way Seuss employs them, they read as nouns. A person would be grammatically correct if he or she said that reading could teach one about sadness, gladness, and madness, but Seuss does not include this suffix. Consequently, the sentences sound strange because they are incorrect. Again, this violation draws readers’ attention to Seuss’s manipulation of language. He is deviating from the norm, and by doing so he openly displays his subjectivity and creativity as author of the text.

Altogether, these different aspects of nonsense at work within Seuss’s book expose and subvert his authority as the adult writer. The text interrogates preconceived notions of adulthood that picture adults as rational beings. If readers identify Seuss with the older cat who is narrating the story, they are simultaneously forced to recognize the way in which he subverts his status as a trustworthy authority on reality. Readers who have their eyes wide open will recognize that for the thirty times the older cat appears in the book (including the cover, but not the two logos) he has his eyes completely closed nineteen times and fully open only seven. The other three times he has one eye closed and one eye open. This is significant in such a self-reflexive book, because the cat is advocating for one thing and doing the opposite. In other words, he is not taking his own advice, which implies that he might not be reliable. Conversely, the younger cat, who

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appears thirty-seven times in the story, has both eyes open for twenty-eight of his appearances, and one eye open for three. Unlike the older cat, his eyes are only closed in six pictures. This suggests that the younger cat already knows the value of keeping his eyes open.

In this respect, Seuss’s book plays with the idea that adults need to teach children how to learn. To a degree, the silent but wide-awake younger cat appears a lot wiser than the older cat telling the story. Indeed, the shocked expression the young cat wears at different moments is reminiscent of the kind of face a parent might make when chasing after a troublesome child. And yet, at other moments, it appears that the older cat is the guardian of the younger. This ambiguous play exposes the ambivalence that Nodelman regards as the key feature of children’s literature (Hidden 185). The boundaries between the adult and child characters are blurred, because, as Seuss’s nonsensical text demonstrates, understandings of children and adults are built upon a number of artificial binaries, least of which includes the categorization of children as irrational beings and adults as rational ones.

Seuss’s deliberate play with these boundaries encourages readers to question the assumed differences between adults and children. The adult cat creates much more disorder than the younger cat. At the end of the book the two are driving in a car and the older cat remarks: “If you read with your eyes shut / you’re likely to find / that the place where you’re going / is far, far, behind” (Seuss, Eyes Shut).37 Once again, the illustration shows the older cat with his eyes closed and the younger cat with his eyes open. Around them is a mish-mash of signs randomly labeled with the names of different cities and traffic warnings. Words like “Schenectady,” “Wabash 9 miles,” “Slow Down,” “Tokyo,” and “Salina Kansas Birthplace of Curtis A. Abel 2376

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“Nine to 3,” decorate an array of posts pointed in conflicting directions (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). The haphazard labeling of these signs, which make no sense, is indicative of the way words direct us to different places. The signs are foreignizing because they point to the arbitrary and subjective nature of Seuss’s language use.

![Image of a road map with signs pointing to different places](image)

Figure 6 (Seuss, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*. New York: Random House, 1978).

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Viewed from this perspective, Seuss appears to be offering his readers a visual metaphor of the reading process. Written language is a road map and children have to be careful when reading the directions given to them by others. The truth of this analogy is figuratively and literally driven home by the older cat, who is at the wheel of the car with his eyes closed. Understandably, the younger cat’s expression is one of concern. The underlying suggestion is

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that if children do not pay close attention to the things they read, they will be misled. Because the self-reflexive nature of the book leads readers to identify the narrator’s voice with Seuss’s, we can see how this suggestion encourages children to undermine his authority as author of the text. He is, by his own admission, unreliable. This admission is made more explicit on the final page of the book when the older cat states: “SO…/ that’s why I tell you / to keep your eyes wide. / Keep them wide open…/ at least on one side” (Seuss, *Eyes Shut*). The accompanying illustration shows the older cat and the younger cat winking at each other, a visual representation of the wink Seuss is giving his readers. He is reminding them, as he has throughout his playful book, that language is tricky and that readers, if they are not careful, can be tricked. Adult writers can play hide and seek, and children have to keep their eyes open in order to catch them.

### 4.2 Shel Silverstein

#### 4.2.1 Where the Sidewalk Ends

Now that our eyes are wide open, let us continue on with our investigation. Moving beyond Seuss, the next hidden adult on our list of nonsense poets is Shel Silverstein. Finding the adult unconscious in his texts involves examining whether his nonsense alludes to the ambivalence of children’s literature by deviating from (i.e., foreignizing) its conventions. The first hiding places to be considered are those found in his 1974 poetry collection, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. The poem, “Enter This Deserted House,” provides a good starting place for this discussion. The poem reads:

Enter this deserted house / But please walk softly as you do. / Frogs dwell here and crickets too. / Ain’t no ceiling, only blue / Jays dwell here and sunbeams too. / Floors are

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flowers—take a few. / Ferns grow here and daisies too. / Whoosh, swoosh—too-whit, too-woo, / Bats dwell here and hoot owls too. / Ha-ha-ha, hee-hee, hoo-hoooo / Gnomes dwell here and goblins too. / And my child, I thought you knew / I dwell here…and so do you. (Silverstein, Sidewalk 56) 40

The nonsensical aspect of this poem arises out of Silverstein’s play with logic. The poem begins with the acknowledgement that the house is “deserted,” and yet, the speaker proceeds to describe all of its inhabitants. The “frogs,” “crickets,” and “jays,” that “dwell” in the house subvert the notion that it is deserted. Of course, the fact that these creatures are insects and animals may explain why the house is considered deserted. Lots of wild creatures occupy houses that have been left by people. Even so, Silverstein interrogates this notion of emptiness through his repetition of the word “dwell.” Like most nonsense, his poem centers around the presence and absence of things. Deserted houses are, he demonstrates, not empty places.

Indeed, as the poem continues it becomes apparent that more occupies the house than meets the eye. Silverstein establishes a number of dialectic binaries, that of light vs. darkness, reality vs. imagination, the natural vs. the unnatural, and sanity vs. insanity. The first few lines introduce readers to an idealistic world of blue sky, sunbeams, frogs, crickets, flowers, and ferns—a world that does not seem to reflect the inside of the house as much as it does the outside of it. However, as the poem continues there is a shift into darkness, emphasized by references to sounds and nocturnal creatures. The onomatopoeic train of words, “Whoosh, swoosh—too-whit, too-woo” that precedes the statement, “[b]ats dwell here and hoot owls too,” creates a sense of

blindness (Silverstein, Sidewalk 56). The speaker and the readers are no longer dependent on visual stimuli, but sound for information. At the same time, this blindness takes the reader inward. There is a tension between the external world of the house, which the reader cannot see, and the internal world of his or her mind. Such a shift is marked by the mention of imaginary creatures, such as “[g]nomes” and “goblins.” Significantly, these imaginary creatures are of the scarier sort—the trickster kind that would be more at home in the dark. The manic laughter, “Ha-ha-ha, hee-hee, hoo-hoooo,” amplifies the atmosphere of creepiness (Silverstein, Sidewalk 56).

Consequently, as readers make their way through the poem they move from a place of certainty (i.e., the house is deserted; there is light; we can see and know what is real) to a place of uncertainty (i.e., the house is not deserted; there is darkness; we cannot see or know what is real).

This place of uncertainty reaches its climax in the final lines of the poem. The speaker states: “And my child, I thought you knew / I dwell here…and so do you” (Silverstein, Sidewalk 56). This nonsensical twist creates the ultimate foreignizing effect. I say nonsensical, because it upsets the internal logic of the entire poem. If the “child” being addressed lives in the house, why is he or she being given a tour of it? And if the child and the speaker live there, how can it be deserted? The eeriness of this moment is substantial. Is the speaker a ghost? Is the child addressee a ghost? The questions of who and what the speaker is are most prevalent in readers’ thoughts. After all, who are they alone in the dark with? This instance, I suggest, is the moment where the hidden adult makes his appearance. While the first line of the poem “Enter this

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deserted house” invites readers to identify with the addressee, the last few lines shock them into dissociating from this identification. The estrangement that occurs encourages children to question what they just read and who wrote it. Readers know that the speaker is not a child because he addresses them as “my child.” The fact that the speaker is older and knows more than the person he is addressing (i.e., the reader) creates the impression that he is some sort of adult. Who has taken them to this place? The unspoken question points back to the writer of the poem—Silverstein.

Combined, all of the different juxtapositions in this poem create a nonsensical situation meant to disorient readers. The ambivalence of the situation highlights the ambivalence of the speaker, which in turn exposes the ambivalent status of the poet, who is an adult writing children’s literature. The number of signified meanings far exceeds the signifier (i.e., the house). Consequently, language becomes unstable and the narrator unreliable. Are we in a deserted house? Or, have we entered into an insane person’s mind? Does the poem ask for a literal interpretation, figurative interpretation, or both? Are we in the realm of the real or the unreal? The natural or the unnatural? The suggestion that the child addressee is being given the tour of a house he or she has never left creates a sense of circularity; readers are trapped by the logic, which folds in on itself. This distortion of logic is what offers us a glimpse of the repressed adult unconscious of the text, an unconscious that is opened up by the last few lines. The nonsensical allusion to readers’ present reality generates self-reflexivity. The speaker’s surprising statement forces them to reconsider their relationship to the poem in front of them. Using Shire’s analogy
of nonsense, Silverstein breaks the mirror of mimetic reality (i.e., the text). By breaking this mirror, he offers readers the “glimpse” Sewell speaks of. His nonsense, “produce[s] by re-patterning of letters in a word or of objects in a seemingly given universe, a dislocation of that given and then a re-location” (Sewell, “Nonsense” 144-145). In this case, the last few lines of the poem offer readers a glimpse of the adult presence underlying children’s literature.

A similar self-reflexivity and eeriness appears in “The Worst.” This poem, like the one just mentioned, represents another attempt by Silverstein to unsettle his reader. Whereas “Enter This Deserted House” has an unreliable invisible guide, “The Worst” plays with our imaginations to generate visions of an invisible monster. The poem goes:

When singing songs of scariness / Of bloodiness and hairyness, / I feel obligated to remind you / Of the most ferocious beast of all: / Three thousand pounds and nine feet tall— / The Glurpy Slurpy Skakagrall— / Who’s standing right behind you. (Silverstein, Sidewalk 130)

Again, this poem plays with the presence and absence of meaning. The nonsensical creature mentioned, “[t]he Glurpy Slurpy Skakagrall,” is a foreignizing, fictional creation. And yet, it escapes out of the book through the phrase, “standing right behind you” (Silverstein, Sidewalk 130). The line has the equivalent effect to the saying, “Look over there!” Silverstein is essentially playing with his readers’ minds. The repeated “ss” sound creates a monster-like hissing, while the drawn out rhyme of “all” and “tall” underscores the monster’s size. Readers

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44 In terms of its representation of reality, Shires describes nonsense as “that which cannot be seen, or known, or held onto: the broken mirror, the broken image” (268).
know that there is no such being, but in order to refute the speaker’s statement they are forced to think of what really is, or may be, behind them.

At the same time, the reference to *that which is behind* inevitably makes readers reflect on *what is in front* (i.e., the poem). Is the Glurpy Slurpy Skakagrall real? No. Then whose invisible creation is it? Who is trying to scare them? Why, the invisible adult author of course! He is trying to scare them with “songs of scariness, / Of bloodiness and hairyness” (Silverstein, *Sidewalk* 130). In this way Silverstein’s play with directionality increases readers’ awareness of the way he is trying to trick them. His attempted manipulation is made more apparent by the illustration that accompanies the poem. The picture of the scary monster appears, not behind readers, but in the book in front of them. Who is behind this monster mask? Who is behind the book? Silverstein. Through this self-reflexive play he makes his presence visible to his readers.

These Silverstein poems present an interesting balance of light-hearted and dark-sided humor. They are both eerie and funny in the way they prey on and play with children’s fears of monsters and darkness. Another poem that creates such interplay is Silverstein’s, “Skinny.” The poem tells the nonsensical tale of a man in a bathtub, who is so slender he slides down the drain. It reads:

Skinny McGuinn / was so terribly thin / that while taking his bath / Sunday night, / out popped the plug / and sloosh-swoosh / and glug-glug / it washed Skinny / right down the drain / out of sight. / And where is our dear Skinny /bathing tonight? / In some

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underground pool / down below? / Or up there so high / in that tub in the sky / where all
of / the clean people go? (Silverstein, *Sidewalk* 142)\(^4\)

The factual nonsense of Silverstein’s poem lies in the speaker’s claim that Skinny McGuinn was
so thin that he accidentally slipped down the drain. Such a thing is impossible, especially when
considering the relative sizes between a person and a bathtub drain. That Skinny is in fact a
person is made clear, not only by the speaker’s reference to “people” at the end, but also by the
accompanying illustration which shows a hand reaching for help out of a bathtub.

While this nonsensical claim forms the basis of the poem, it allows Silverstein to play
with the implications of Skinny’s absence and his potential presence somewhere else. Because
Skinny is no longer with us (i.e., the speaker or the reader), the inference is that he has died. The
fact that this idea is not spoken directly emphasizes the ways in which children’s literature tends
to conceal or leave out unpleasant information that readers are aware of. Although the speaker
never explicitly says that Skinny died, the man’s very absence implies that he is dead. In order to
make sense of where he might be, readers are left to consider the options. The speaker’s
euphemistic discussion of these options seems to reaffirm the suspicion that Skinny is no longer
in this world. His juxtaposition of the two possible places Skinny might be, either the
“underground pool down below,” or, “up there so high / in that tub in the sky,” alludes to hell
and heaven (Silverstein, *Sidewalk* 142).\(^4\) This allusion is made stronger by the contrast of low
and high. If the reader has any doubts on the matter, Silverstein makes the implication more
suggestive by the fact that “all the clean people go” to the higher place. Here he plays with the

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connotations of clean to mean righteousness and purity; the question is not whether Skinny was *physically clean* enough, but *spiritually clean* enough to go to heaven.

Accordingly, the order-disorder dialectic of Silverstein’s poem appears through the contrast of heaven, which is orderly, and hell, which is not. The dialectic can also be seen in the corresponding images of cleanliness (orderliness) and dirtiness (disorderliness). The bathtub imagery supplies a number of potential meanings. On a figurative level, the act of bathing and making oneself clean on a Sunday could be associated with baptism and repentance. The likeliness of Skinny engaging in this act of purification, however, is cast into doubt by the fact that his life has gone “down the drain.” Silverstein offers us a literal representation of the figurative cliché people use to describe a wasted existence. Skinny is washed away like dirt, his arm reaching desperately out of the tub for help. In this way the possibility of his *ascent* into heaven is compromised by the circumstances surrounding his death; Skinny’s demise is pictured as a violent *descent*, sudden, and not at all peaceful.

Through this dialectic and the ambivalent state of Skinny’s afterlife, Silverstein brings his readers into a place of uncertainty. This uncertainty, in turn, offers us a glimpse of the hidden adult. For if Skinny was not clean enough to go to heaven, that means he was dirty, and not just in the physical sense. Indeed, it is in the concept of *dirtiness*, which is brought forth by the emphasis on *cleanliness*, that Silverstein exposes the adult unconscious of his text. The possibilities surrounding Skinny’s potential dirtiness (i.e., sin) extend to an array of crude and vulgar topics—precisely the kind that are forbidden to children, which is why they are foreignizing in the context of a children’s poem. Sexual and violent indiscretions, alcoholism, drug use etc.—these are unclean and supposedly ‘adult’ sins that children are not meant to know about. However, as Nodelman notes in his book, just because children are not *meant* to know
about them does not mean that they do not (*Hidden* 207, 209). On the contrary, children, Nodelman and Reimer observe, know a lot more than adults give them credit for (102). The humor in this poem plays on children’s awareness of these topics—the dirty topics—that are kept out of their literature, but not necessarily out of their awareness.

Exposing this awareness, Silverstein’s nonsensical poem highlights the ambivalence of children’s literature. The dialectic that exists between innocence and knowledge, purity and impurity are at the heart of children’s fiction. On the one hand, adults believe children to be innocent and pure, and on the other, they are afraid that children are not as innocent or pure as they believe them to be, that they are capable of irrational and rebellious behavior (Nodelman and Reimer 88). Instead of trying to convince children that they are one thing or the other, Silverstein meets them where they are. His play with language and the nonsensical explanation for Skinny’s demise draw their attention to the way he, as the poet, is constructing an impossible (and therefore foreignizing) situation. The deeper implications of this situation (i.e., that Skinny was a dirty man), however, are not improbable. Highlighting this fact, Silverstein’s nonsense verse exposes the adult unconscious underlying children’s literature and reminds children of the conventions that govern what they are ‘allowed’ to know.

Another poem that touches on the conventions of children’s literature is the one titled, “Chester.” The poem is brief, but to the point in the way it highlights the arbitrary boundaries that distinguish adults from children. The poem goes: “Chester come to school and said, / ‘Durn, I growed another head.’ / Teacher said, ‘It’s time you knowed / The word is ‘grew’ instead of
‘growed’” (Silverstein, Sidewalk 147). The nonsense here, as in the previous poem, is of a factual nature; the reader knows that it is impossible to grow two heads. Augmenting this nonsensical aspect of the poem, however, is the grammatical nonsense used to describe it. Silverstein plays off the external and internal tensions that exist between non-standard English (i.e., the world outside of school) and Standard English (i.e., the world inside of school). The order-disorder dialectic is maintained through the dialogue that ensues between student and teacher. Chester speaks incorrectly when he uses the slang word “Durn” and the incorrect/nonexistent word “growed.” The irony, of course, is that when the teacher goes to correct him, he or she speaks incorrectly, making the same mistake as Chester. The similarity of their mistakes is emphasized in the rhyme of “growed” and “knowed.” This, and the fact that the correct past tense of know (i.e., knew), rhymes with the past tense of grow (i.e., grew), leads readers to correct the teacher’s mistake in their heads.

The teacher’s slip emphasizes the arbitrary nature of language and the power structures that underlie its standardization. The poem plays with the question of who determines how language should be spoken. The teacher has the power to correct Chester, but Chester does not have the power to correct his teacher. Accordingly, the dynamics of the adult-child relationship are revealed in this moment, where the teacher is allowed to use language in any way he or she likes, but Chester is not. In this way the basis for the teacher’s authority is also shown to be arbitrary. The teacher says one thing and does another. Worst of all, he/she is shown to be arrogant in his/her ignorance. The teacher tells Chester, “[i]t’s time you knowed,” a statement

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that infers that Chester is old enough to know better (Silverstein, *Sidewalk* 147). However, this admonition is somewhat hypocritical, for if Chester is old enough to know better, then certainly the teacher, who is older than Chester, should know better than to make the same mistake.

Undoubtedly, this linguistic debate distracts us from the larger and more important issue at hand. The teacher is so obsessed with the form of Chester’s speech that he/she completely misses the content of it. The most disturbing aspect of their interaction is that the teacher is more preoccupied with Chester’s incorrect grammar than the fact that he has grown a second head. Again, Silverstein exposes the arbitrary nature of adults’ power over children. They are able to determine what matters and what does not, what makes sense and what is nonsense—just because. Encouraging children to recognize instead of hide their knowledge of this fact, Silverstein upsets the conventions of traditional children’s literature. Instead of reinforcing adult authority and legitimizing the difference between adults and children, he places them on a level intellectual playing field. Although it is tempting to focus on the teacher’s grammatical blunder, it is important to notice that the speaker of the poem, the voice we might identify as Silverstein’s, also speaks improperly. In the first sentence he says, “come,” instead of, “came.” In this way, Silverstein draws attention to the power dynamics at work within the adult-child dialectic of his poem and questions the foundation for it. Focusing on the ways adults use language to control and influence children, he reminds his readers of the way he controls the text and allows them space to question his authority as the author of it.

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52 In his discussion of the hidden adult of children’s literature, Nodelman writes: “a key part of the process that texts of children’s literature characteristically invite readers to undergo is hiding their knowledge of the fictionality of the childhood in question—rendering it invisible” (213).
There is one final note to be made about Where the Sidewalk Ends before we make our way up to the attic. In the end pages of Silverstein’s book he has drawn an arm coming up out of the ground. In its hand is a pen that writes in dripping ink: “This Pen is Almost / Out of Ink / But Still I / Have Enough…/ I Thin…” (Silverstein, Sidewalk).\textsuperscript{53} If this is not an amazing illustration of the adult unconscious of a children’s text, I do not know what is. The adult writer is under the ground and right under our noses—this he makes disturbingly clear. Silverstein wants children to find him. Like Seuss, he wants them in on the game he is playing.

\textit{4.2.2 A Light in the Attic}

We have already seen that Silverstein’s nonsense is quite different from Seuss’s. While Seuss uses nonsense to advocate for children and their abilities, Silverstein’s nonsense demonstrates that children are already capable of advocating for themselves. Silverstein’s poetry draws on children’s various repertoires of knowledge, including those of which parents might be unaware. The pleasure of his poetry arises from the ambivalence it creates and the hidden meanings found within that ambivalence. Whereas the foreignizing aspects of Seuss’s nonsense lie mainly in its violation of the rules of standard language, the foreignizing aspects of Silverstein’s work lie in his violation of established cultural norms pertaining to childhood. He employs nonsense as a tactic through which to interrogate traditional conceptions of the adult-child relationship.

This interrogation of the adult-child relationship can be seen in Silverstein’s poem, “They’ve Put a Brassiere on the Camel,” which appears in his 1981 volume, \textit{A Light in the Attic}. In the poem the speaker informs us, very matter of factly, that:

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\end{flushright}
They’ve put a brassiere on the camel / She wasn’t dressed proper, you know. / They’ve put a brassiere on the camel / So that her humps wouldn’t show. / And they’re making other respectable plans, / They’re even insisting the pigs should wear pants, / They’ll dress up the ducks if we give them the chance / Since they’ve put a brassiere on the camel. (Silverstein, *Attic* 166)\(^5^4\)

The nonsense in this poem arises from its logic, which is founded on Silverstein’s play with the word “humps.” Because “humps” is a word sometimes used to describe women’s breasts, the idea is that a camel’s humps, like a woman’s breasts, must be provocative. The idea that their shape might give off similar sexual inferences means that they must be concealed. And what better item to conceal them with than a woman’s bra?

Following this absurd logic it becomes apparent that Silverstein is mocking the censorial practices of the children’s literature industry. In true nonsense-like fashion his poem plays with the fallacies of such logic. While the “they” mentioned in the poem think it more “respectable” and “proper” that the camel’s humps be concealed, the reality is that by concealing them with a woman’s brassiere, the sexual connotation is more prevalent than ever. In fact, people who would never have thought of the similarities between a woman’s breasts and a camel’s humps are now made to think of them by the presence of the brassiere on the animal. Silverstein demonstrates that by concealing or hiding these areas adults are essentially giving them more attention and creating the opposite effect to the one they intended. That this poem is a commentary on the field of children’s literature is evident by Silverstein’s references to the dressing of other animals: “They’re even insisting the pigs should wear pants, / They’ll dress up

the ducks if we give them the chance / Since they’ve put a brassiere on the camel” (Silverstein, 
Attic 166).  

These lines speak to the array of children’s books, including the famous Beatrix Potter collection, that dress up animals in human clothes.

Playing up the ridiculousness of such a notion, the speaker implies that these practices are getting out of hand. The poem concludes:

They’ve put a brassiere on the camel, / They claim she’s more decent this way. / They’ve put a brassiere on the camel, / The camel had nothing to say. / They squeezed her into it, I’ll never know how, / They say that she looks more respectable now, / Lord knows what they’ve got in mind for the cow, / Since they’ve put a brassiere on the camel. (Silverstein, 
Attic 166)  

In this ending stanza the speaker highlights how dressing animals is unnatural, and therefore, nonsensical. The image of the camel in the brassiere is foreignizing because it does not appear normal. The camel is not ashamed of her nakedness; we are told she “had nothing to say” (Silverstein, Attic 166). This silence, however, simultaneously communicates the animal’s powerlessness. The speaker tells us “[T]hey squeezed her into it, I’ll never know how” (Silverstein, Attic 166). People have forced the camel into a brassiere because they imagine her to be a certain way (i.e., risqué). The underlying implication is that if such unfounded
assumptions can be made about a camel, then they can easily be made about other living beings such as a cow, or even a child.

Indeed, as Nodelman and Reimer note, children’s literature exists precisely because adults imagine children to be a certain way and want them to be as they imagine (97). Coincidentally, it is no surprise that the adult unconscious in Silverstein’s text emerges through his dislocation of the childhood adults imagine for children (e.g. the one with clothed animals) and the one actually experienced by them (e.g. the one with naked animals). The “they” in the poem possess authority, which would suggest that they are not children. That “they” see a reason to cover up the camel’s seemingly suggestive “humps” means that they already possess sexual knowledge and are trying to protect the innocence of others. From this perspective, the adults that constitute the “they” resemble the gatekeepers of children’s literature—the writers, parents, educators and publishers. Interestingly, the fact that the speaker refers to them as “they” means that he does not identify with these adults. And yet, complicating his detachment is the fact that his words are the ones putting a brassiere on the camel in the readers’ minds. Moreover, appearing beside the poem on the next page is the illustration of a camel wearing a brassiere. Who drew the illustration? Who put the brassiere on the camel? The same person who wrote the poem: Silverstein. In this dialectic/interplay he exposes his ambivalent status as a children’s writer. He cannot critique the system he belongs to without critiquing his own involvement in that system. By subverting the conventions of children’s literature, he subverts his own authority as a creator of it.

Nevertheless, part of the fun of Silverstein’s nonsense poetry comes from his celebration of the ambivalent ‘adult’ he is made out to be. He can critique adults and attempt to absolve his own responsibility as one. A particularly interesting example of this occurs in his poem, “Skin
Stealer.” Using nonsense as his line of self-defense, the speaker excuses himself from any inappropriate adult behavior. He explains:

This evening I unzipped my skin / And carefully unscrewed my head, / Exactly as I always do / When I prepare myself for bed. / And while I slept a coo-coo came / As naked as could be / And put on the skin / And screwed on the head / That once belonged to me. / Now wearing my feet / He runs through the street / In a most disgraceful way, / Doin’ things and sayin’ things I’d never do or say. (Silverstein, Attic 147)

In this poem the speaker gives himself an alternate identity. Significantly, it is a nonsensical one. The “coo-coo” is the creature that comes in the night and runs away with his skin. Realistically speaking, it is factually impossible for people to step out of their skin and screw off their heads. Consequently, such an idea is foreignizing because it is difficult to imagine people existing without their skins and their heads.

And yet, while it is impossible for a person to exist without skin or a head, it is not impossible for a person to sleep walk without being aware of it. In its reference to sleep, Silverstein’s poem drums up powerful images of the unconscious. Figuratively speaking, the coo-coo might represent the speaker’s repressed desires. The fact that the coo-coo comes at night, when the conscious mind is at rest, strengthens this implication. From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, unconscious desires are at the root of nonsensical dreams (Freud 19). Consequently, the idea that the coo-coo might not be a foreign invader at all, but rather, part of the speaker’s own mind, is quite plausible. The coo-coo’s nonsensical name reinforces its potential association with the unconscious, as does its uncontrollable and “disgraceful” behavior

in the speaker’s skin. Nighttime is the time when the unconscious and the coo-coo are both free to engage in mischief.

Indeed, the correlation between the coo-coo and the unconscious is strengthened by the fact that the speaker is conscious. He is awake, and for this reason can be seen to represent the conscious self, which is normally in control. The fact that the speaker is usually in control is made evident by his methodical and regulated bedtime routine; he unzips his skin and unscrews his head, as he “always do[es] / When [he] prepare[s] [himself] for bed” (Silverstein, Attic 147).60 His apologetic tone and criticism of the coo-coo’s behavior further suggests that he represents the part of the psyche that plays a moralizing role. The coo-coo does things that he would “never do or say” (Silverstein, Attic 147).61 Of all the disgraceful things the coo-coo might do, however, it is interesting that the speaker can only bring himself to mention a few harmless acts. Describing the coo-coo’s behavior, he states: “Ticklin’ the children / And kickin’ the men / And dancin’ the ladies away. / So if he makes your bright eyes cry / Or makes your poor head spin, / That scoundrel you see / Is not really me— / He’s the coo-coo / Who’s wearing my skin” (Silverstein, Attic 147).62 Tickling children, kicking men, and dancing with ladies does not seem that crazy to most people. At least, in comparison with what a crazy person or “scoundrel” might do. The fact that the speaker of the poem does not mention these crazier activities, suggests the ways in which he is repressed. His mind does not explore the various things the coo-coo could do to make the child readers’ “bright eyes cry” or “head spin.” His imagination, in this sense, is

limited by his sense of propriety, which will not allow him to speak about the illicit behaviors of
the coo-coo (i.e., the unconscious).

The speaker’s inability to discuss at length the coo-coo’s disgraceful behavior suggests
the way the text itself is repressed. The speaker cannot describe things that he would never do or
say, because if he said them then he would have to admit that he is capable of saying such things,
and may in fact be the coo-coo. Accordingly, the lack of description surrounding the activities of
the skin stealer reveals the hidden adult in the text. The coo-coo represents that side of adulthood
that ‘cannot’ be made known to childhood. The fact that this side has escaped and is available to
children, as the speaker’s apology implies, indicates that, contrary to the intentions of adults, this
‘adult’ aspect of experience cannot be kept a secret. Quite the opposite, it sneaks up unaware.
More importantly, it masquerades as something it is not, in this case, an innocent man. This play
with identity is significant, because it generates uncertainty about the speaker and his ambivalent
status as a man with no head and skin. The speaker ends the poem with a warning that
appearances may be deceiving. Consequently, readers are left to wonder if the person speaking is
really the man he claims to be, or the coo-coo acting out a masquerade. The speaker’s statement
is self-reflexive in its rhetoric, because it forces readers to take a step back and see what the
poem is saying—what the poet is saying. Is the speaker pretending to be more innocent than he
actually is? Is Silverstein, as a children’s writer, hiding behind a false skin?

So far this discussion of Silverstein’s poetry has focused mainly on its nonsensical and
subversive content. For this reason I now turn to a poem that focuses more on the subversion of
linguistic norms. Silverstein’s poem, “Poemsicle,” provides a great example of the ways in
which he, like Seuss, enjoys playing with language:
If you add sicle to your pop, / Would he become a Popsicle? / Would a mop become a mopsicle? / Would a cop become a copsicle? / Would a chop become a chopsicle? / Would a drop become a dropsicle? / Would a hop become a hopsicle? / I guess it is time to stopsicle, / Or is it timesicle to stopsicle? / Heysicle, I can’t stopsicle. / Ohsicle mysicle willsicle Isicle / Havesicle tocsicle / talksicle / Likesicle thissicle foreversicle—Huhsicle?
(Silverstein, *Attic* 133)\(^3\)

Here Silverstein plays with the suffix “sicle.” In linguistics terms, “sicle” would be considered a bound morpheme, because it cannot exist without the word “pop.” While the word *sickle* is a noun, “sicle” is not a noun and does not carry any meaning of its own. Rather, it modifies the word it is attached to. However, as readers are well aware, the suffix does not make sense alongside certain words.

In fact, removed from the word pop, it is hard to know what kind of meaning the ending sicle adds to a word. Does it indicate a *type* of something—a *form* of something? And if so, what form? The fact that there are not many words that end in sicle makes this a difficult question to answer. Readers, like the speaker, are left to question its function. The speaker’s grouping of the word sicle with other words appears arbitrary, and yet, the word sicle itself is arbitrary—even in its association with pop. Silverstein emphasizes the randomness of this word through his play with the connotations of the word pop. In his poem, “pop” does not refer to the beverage, which potentially could be associated with a Popsicle, but rather, someone’s father: the pop is referred to as “he.” The juxtaposition of a person (i.e., a father) with the food item “Popsicle” creates a humorous and foreignizing comparison. The speaker’s play with the ending “sicle” appears silly,

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\(^3\) *A Light in the Attic* © 1981 by Evil Eye Music, Inc. Published by HarperCollins Children’s Books. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by permission.
and yet, because it forces readers to think about the actual significance of the word ending, it simultaneously highlights the silliness of the word Popsicle.

Indeed, even in its appropriate context the word Popsicle now appears random, and this randomness leads one to consider whether the person who originally invented the word may have been playing with language in a similar way to the speaker. For it is through his play with the made-up suffix “sicle” that Silverstein draws attention to the way words are invented. Casting the seriousness of grammatical correctness aside, he reminds readers that language is anything but standard. On the contrary, it is all about creativity. The many contradictions to be found in the English language are proof that the logic governing its creation and use does not always makes sense. And as the last few lines of the poem make clear, the possibilities are endless. The speaker states: “I can’t stopsicle” (Silverstein, Attic 133). He continues to test the boundaries of language by attaching “sicle” to various parts of speech. In this respect, he creates a game somewhat like that of Pig Latin, which attaches different nonsensical endings to words in an attempt to conceal their meanings.

Silverstein’s play, however, allows readers to see the ways in which adding new endings can disguise the meanings of words. Even his most distorted sentences are still decipherable. He makes his subjectivity visible through his manipulation of language, which clearly highlights the fact that he is in control of the text. Also highlighting his presence in the poem is the illustration that accompanies it. The picture shows a man’s head (i.e., the pop/father) on top of a wheel—kind of like a unicycle. The foreignizing image plays on the sound correspondence between the words “cycle” and “sicle.” In this respect, Silverstein uses his roles as both writer and illustrator

to comment on the way language can be misinterpreted. He does so by subverting the usual 
function of pictures, which is to aid readers in their decoding of the text. Exposing the ways he is 
attempting to lead children astray, he simultaneously opens up space for them to question how he 
is using words and images to influence them. The association of “cycle” with “sicle” presents a 
self-reflexive glimpse of the way Silverstein’s linguistic play is making readers’ heads, like that 
of the man’s, spin in circles.

4.2.3 Runny Babbit

Readers find a more sustained example of Silverstein’s linguistic play in *Runny Babbit*, a 
book that was completed prior to his death in 1999, but published posthumously in 2005. Unlike 
Silverstein’s other collections, which feature discrete, unrelated poems, *Runny Babbit* is a poetry 
book centered around one character, a rabbit named Runny. And yet, as the title indicates, Runny 
is not a rabbit at all; he is a babbit. In the introduction to the book, the speaker states:

Way down in the green woods / Where the animals all play, / They do things and they say 
things / In a different sort of way— / Instead of sayin’ ‘purple hat,’ / They all say ‘hurple 
pat.’ / Instead of sayin’ ‘feed the cat,’ / They just say ‘ceed the fat.’ / So if you say, 
‘Let’s bead a rook / That’s billy as can se,’ / You’re talkin’ Runny Babbit talk, / Just like 
mim and he. (Silverstein, *Runny* 4)\(^{65}\)

In this introduction Silverstein initiates children into his word game. He has designed a book of 
spoonerisms, where he switches the first letters of two words in a phrase. This sustained play, 
however, creates the ultimate example of foreignization. Silverstein takes a familiar place (e.g. 
woods), familiar creatures (e.g. animals), and objects (e.g. purple hat, book etc.) and estranges

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them through a switch in orthography. While readers are aware of the sense the sentence should make were it not for this switch, they are simultaneously conscious of the way the switch has changed the original meaning of the sentence.

To be sure, while sometimes Silverstein’s play leads to the creation of nonexistent or nonsensical words, at others it leads to the formation of recognizable words, the meaning of which does not fit in the context of the sentence. This formation creates a different sort of nonsensical effect. For example, when the speaker states: “So if you say, ‘Let’s bead a rook / That’s billy as can see,” readers recognize that the word “bead” is an actual verb, whereas the word “rook,” which is a little more obscure, refers to a kind of crow or card swindler (Silverstein, Runny 4). Although readers may not know what “rook” means, they are probably aware that to bead one does not sound logically possible. At the same time, they can see that the sentence would make sense if it meant: “read a book that’s silly as can be.” In this way, Silverstein’s book forces readers to engage with language at an analytical level. Children have to negotiate word meanings in their attempts to understand the text and the illustrations that accompany it. The rhyme encourages them to pronounce strange words in ways that might not make sense outside of the verse. The word “se” for instance is pronounced as “see” to rhyme with “he.” In cases like these, readers are led to pronounce words in a way they normally would not, an action that leads to the production of more meanings that do not make any sense. How can a book, or rook for that matter, be as billy as seeing? These are the kinds of conundrums readers face in Runny Babbit.

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67 Like Geller notes in her study of wordplay, this activity facilitates learning because it encourages children to reflect on how Standard English works, by seeing how it does not (41).
Silverstein’s linguistic play, however, does not stop him from developing complex themes within his work. In fact, the foreignizing effect of the spoonerisms creates an interesting commentary on ordinary themes in children’s fiction. In “Runny’s Rittle Leminders,” the speaker describes all of the different reminders Runny’s mother has to give him in order to ensure that he behaves properly. The poem goes: “Runny doesn’t always do / The thoper pring at all. / Just see the motes his namma / Has pasted on his wall” (Silverstein, *Runny* 36-37).\(^6\) This poem engages readers at multiple levels. At the linguistic level, they know that “thoper pring” is not the correct way to say or spell “proper thing.” In this respect, Silverstein subverts the seriousness of adult didacticism through his spoonerisms, which distort the gravity of their messages. The number of “motes” Runny’s mother writes him cover the entire wall and read something like: “Don’t tread rash,” “Don’t batch your screhind (at least pot in public),” “Don’t balk tack,” and “Nop staggering” (Silverstein, *Runny* 37).\(^9\) These are only a few of the many reminders that the little rabbit is pictured looking at from the floor. This poem thus offers great, as well as subversive, insight into the way adults use language to try to regulate children’s behavior.

Something important to notice about the character of Runny in the book is the fact that his status as a child/adult is ambivalent. While there are poems like the ones just mentioned that speak to his childlike behavior and dependence on his parents, there are also others that indicate he is a more mature rabbit, such as “Runny’s Rig Bomance” and “A Bittle Laby for Runny?” The adult undertones are especially prevalent in the latter, which describes Runny’s encounter with the stork. The poem goes:

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Sticky Dork came flyin’ down / To Runny from the blue. / He said, ‘Surprise! I cot the gutest / Kid here—just for you.’ / Runny yelled, ‘This pid’s a kig / That’s fink and pat and wet!’ Sticky said, ‘We all have got / To take the gid we ket.’ (Silverstein, *Runny 82*)

In this interaction the foreignizing words “pid” and “kig” underscore Runny’s surprise at receiving, not just a ‘child,’ but a child of a different species. His disgust at his new offspring, which is “fink and pat and wet” challenges the notion that children are sweet and precious creatures (Silverstein, *Runny 82*). The Sticky Dork’s use of the word “gutest” instead of “cutest” mocks adults’ romanticization of children, whereas the bird’s very presence reminds readers that adults envision children as pure and innocent beings, who are not to be tainted by the facts of life (i.e., sex).

To be sure, the stork is the adult-approved explanation for children’s origins until they are old enough to receive sex education. The romantic view of childhood associated with the stork, however, is subverted by his acknowledgement that, “[w]e all have got / To take the gid we ket” (Silverstein, *Runny 82*). The spoonerisms in the poem help disguise the darker implications of the bird’s statement, which suggest that a lot of adults find their children unsatisfactory—even undesirable. Humor offsets the potential truth underlying the stork’s words, thereby creating the emotional distance that Tigges’s recognizes as a key feature of nonsense (*Literary Nonsense* 257). Even so, the reader is left uncertain as to whether or not Runny accepts
or rejects his new baby. The question mark in the title of the poem “A Bittle Laby For Runny?” emphasizes the ambiguity of the rabbit’s encounter with the stork. Accordingly, in this poem Silverstein uses nonsense to say the unsaid. His subversion of the romantic notion of childhood conjured up by the stork and the ‘miracle’ of birth it represents, reminds readers of his subjective presence. They are aware of the way he is breaking a commonly held stereotype to reveal an alternative perspective.

Indeed, this tendency towards subversive deviation is a key feature of Silverstein’s book. His foreignization of the familiar takes on an intertextual emphasis through its interaction with other children’s literature. Readers see this element in “Runny’s Jig Bump,” which patterns itself after the nursery rhyme, “Jack Be Nimble.” The speaker states: “Runny be quimble, / Runny be nick, / Runny cump over the jandlestick. / But now—what smells like furning bluff? Guess he didn’t hump jigh enough” (Silverstein, Runny 28). Silverstein’s play with the popular nursery rhyme increases readers’ awareness of his subjectivity. Because they likely have knowledge of the original, they know what the words should say, and how Silverstein is changing it. The rhymed nature of the verse helps their recall, as its similarity to the original makes the association obvious (at least to those who have heard it). Silverstein makes use of this recall in order to enter into dialogue with the original poem. His mimicry of “Jack Be Nimble” makes his additions to it even more obvious. When the speaker states: “But now—what smells like furning bluff? / Guess he didn’t hump jigh enough,” informed readers are aware that it is Silverstein talking—that he has added a funny commentary onto the original poem by considering the

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natural outcome of jumping over candlesticks (Silverstein, *Runny* 28). In this way, he steps out of the text’s shadows.

And it is with these visions of shadows, adults, and a white rabbit on fire that we exit Silverstein’s nonsensical world in pursuit of our next destination. Having gone beyond zebras, sidewalks, and attics we now venture north to the land of alligator pie and bottomless boxes. Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein have proven excellent playmates. Now it is time to find the hiding places of their Canadian counterparts.

Dennis Lee and JonArno Lawson, here we come.

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Chapter 5: Finding the Hidden Adult: Playing Hide and Seek with Dennis Lee and JonArno Lawson

Extending this study of nonsense verse north of the border, this chapter explores the work of Canadian children’s poets Dennis Lee and JonArno Lawson. Reiterating the agenda laid out in the beginning of the last section, my objectives are to:

1) Determine if and how Lee and Lawson’s nonsense verse is foreignizing;
2) Consider the effect this potential foreignization does/does not have on the visibility of the hidden adult in children’s literature.

Again, meeting these objectives involves examining each primary text and identifying the ways it does or does not depart from conventional representations of childhood. Applying the theoretical lenses of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory in a close reading of Lee and Lawson’s nonsense poetry, I will a) outline the way each text is nonsensical and b) explain how this nonsense may or may not be estranging for readers, and thus resemble a foreignizing writing strategy.

In keeping with my objectives, this chapter will follow the same method as the previous. Upon identifying any foreignizing elements in each writer’s nonsense poetry I will consider how it does or does not bring into play the adult “shadow texts” Nodelman describes as characteristic of children’s literature (200). In the process, I will c) reflect on how these elements might illuminate the writer’s presence and d) how they might also allude to and encourage children’s awareness of forbidden ‘adult’ topics, effectively reminding them that ‘childhood,’ as it appears in children’s books, is an adult translation (i.e., interpretation) of children’s lived experiences.
As before, I will be employing the concept of the ‘implied reader’ to discuss the target readers (i.e., ideal readers) intimated by the text.

Because Lee and Lawson’s poetry does not come in the form of rhymed narrative picture books, my close reading of their work will focus primarily on their written texts. Unlike Seuss and Silverstein, Lee and Lawson are not known for their illustrations. Thus, while I do make a point of acknowledging the illustrations that add to understandings of their poetry, I do not spend as much time analyzing them as I do the linguistic nonsense in the collections. The poems to be discussed were chosen to present a range of Lee and Lawson’s work. They appear at different places in the poets’ respective collections, are of various lengths, and complexity. As in the previous chapter, the intention behind my selection is to showcase the diversity of each writer’s nonsense by highlighting the different forms that it takes.

5.1 Dennis Lee

5.1.1 Alligator Pie

The first stop on this northern journey is Dennis Lee’s best-selling poetry collection, Alligator Pie. Published in 1974, Lee’s book has become a well-known classic in English Canadian children’s literature. While he has written many poetry collections since, it makes sense to start this study of his nonsense with the book that catalyzed his career as a children’s poet. Knowing what we know about the foreignizing tendencies of nonsense, it is time to explore how Lee’s subjectivity, like Seuss’s and Silverstein’s, does or does not make itself known in his work. In other words, what is he trying to reveal/ hide through his nonsense? What messages about childhood and adulthood are being translated?

With these questions in mind we turn our attention to Lee’s poem, “Ookpik.” The title itself may be foreignizing for those who do not know what it references. An Ookpik is an Inuit-
crafted owl toy. Created in the early 1960s, the owl has become a popular symbol of Canadian aboriginal art production. By writing a poem about the “Ookpik” Lee thus alerts his readers to the way he is drawing upon aspects of Canadian culture. Explaining the snowy owl, the speaker states:

An Ookpik is nothing but hair. / If you shave him, he isn’t there. / He’s never locked in the zoo. / He lives in a warm igloo. / He can whistle and dance on the walls. / He can sing on Niagara Falls. / He has nothing at all on his mind. / If you scratch him, he wags his behind. / He dances from morning to night. / Then he blinks. That turns out the light.

(Lee, *Alligator* 21)\(^75\)

As the poem demonstrates, Lee has taken the liberty of attributing nonsensical characteristics to the Inuit art piece. While the snowy owls that inspired the Ookpik toy do exist, Lee’s version of the Ookpik does not. Indeed, were it not for Frank Newfeld’s illustration, readers might not even be aware that the creature in question resembles an owl. According to Lee, the Ookpik “is nothing but hair.” Readers are aware that neither an owl, nor any living being can consist only of hair. Consequently, Lee’s use of factual and logical nonsense alerts us to the subjective nature of the poem. His nonsense points to the way he has playfully appropriated and foreignized the symbol of the Ookpik.

The rest of the nonsense in Lee’s poem follows from these factual and logical inconsistencies. How, for instance, can the Ookpik “whistle and dance” and “sing” without lips or feet? Hair cannot whistle. How can he “wag his behind” when you scratch him, if he has no behind? In this way, Lee uses nonsense to play with the presence and absence of meaning in his

poem. The lines are grammatically correct, and yet, taken as a whole they do not make sense. True, it may be possible for the Ookpik to have “nothing at all on his mind,” because he has no mind, but the use of this figurative phrase in a context where it may be taken literally creates a foreignizing effect. Nothingness, in this context, means nonexistence—to have nothing on one’s mind means one is nothing.

Lee’s play with the presence and absence of meaning reflects the way the Ookpik appears and disappears throughout the poem. The speaker tells us that if we “shave him, he isn’t there.” This act of shaving is foreignizing, because normally people remove hair to reveal something (e.g. their faces or legs). Shaving the Ookpik, however, leads to his concealment—he disappears. The juxtaposition of the Ookpik’s arbitrary appearances and disappearances further highlights the subjective nature of Lee’s creation. The Ookpik is not “locked in the zoo,” he lives in a “warm igloo,” and he sings “on Niagara Falls.” These random statements are somewhat confusing in the mixed messages they carry. The reference to the zoo, for example, does not tell us where the Ookpik is, just where he is not. We know that the Ookpik wanders from his “warm igloo,” because he sings on Niagara Falls. Consequently, we are not entirely sure where he is to be found. Moreover, the phrase “warm igloo” presents conflicting images of warm and cold. Although Inuit peoples use igloos to keep warm, the very mention of these snow structures projects images of extreme Arctic weather. In this respect, “warm igloo” functions almost like an oxymoron. Where Niagara Falls is concerned, Lee foreignizes a familiar tourist destination by associating it with an unfamiliar creature. The Falls are a natural creation and Lee’s Ookpik is definitely an unnatural one.

Combined, these foreignizing elements surrounding the Ookpik’s strange existence point to the way Lee has constructed the text. The play with logic, the random order of places and
things, all reflect the subjectivity of the poet. The last line of the poem, “Then he blinks. That turns out the light,” brings it to an abrupt halt. Up until then, Lee’s rhyme sweeps readers along in a rhythm that mirrors the movement of the Ookpik—the hairy creature that dances from one place to another. The presence of factual and logical nonsense in the last few lines, however, reminds them of the illusion he has created. There is no logical explanation for why blinking would turn out the light (excepting momentarily), just as there is no logical explanation for how an Ookpik could have eyes to blink if he were made entirely out of hair. This nonsensical reasoning further illuminates Lee’s subjective presence within the text. His Ookpik appears and disappears in the blink of an eye, its presence and absence dependent on his own imaginings.

Another of Lee’s nonsensical creatures, though not inspired by an Inuit art piece, is the grundiboob. Along with the Ookpik, the grundiboob also appears in later volumes of his work. The creature is first introduced, however, in Alligator Pie. Similar to “Ookpik,” the poem “If You Should Meet” presents readers with a nonsensical logic that can only be accredited to the imaginings of the adult writer. It goes:

If you should meet a grundiboob, / Comfort him with sugar cubes. / Then send him on his way again / With feather beds, in case of rain. / If you meet him going out / Place a doughnut on his snout. / But if you meet him coming back, / Give his nose a mighty whack. / And if you meet a potamus, / Sleeping on a cotamus, / Do not sing or talkamus, / But take him for a walkamus. / If you should meet a crankabeast, / Be sure his forehead
isn’t creased; / Then pat him gently on his heads / And tuck him quickly into beds.

(Lee, *Alligator 37*)

Again, the factual and logical nonsense of this poem creates a foreignizing effect that offers readers glimpses of Lee’s presence. Although the voice of the speaker is ambivalent—we are not told if it is a child or an adult talking—it is authoritative in the advice it imparts. The speaker has explicit instructions for the addressee of the poem. Because these directions are of a nonsensical quality, they highlight the arbitrary construction of the poem as well as the writer’s subjective presence. Only *he* can speak with authority on his imagined creations, for only *he* knows what they are like. He is able to make up the rules when it comes to his own fictions.

In this respect, Lee’s nonsense verse, like that of Seuss and Silverstein, invites readers’ awareness of the arbitrary nature of language and the dynamics of children’s literature.

Nodelman notes that:

[A] key part of the process that texts of children’s literature characteristically invite their readers to undergo is hiding their knowledge of the fictionality of the childhood in question—rendering it invisible. If children are to pretend to occupy the childhood adults imagine for them, then they must mask their awareness of the extent to which it is the product of adult minds and does not jibe with their own actual perceptions—or accept it as true and forget any of those actual perceptions that don’t jibe with it. (*Hidden* 213)

Lee’s nonsense does not allow readers to forget the fictional nature of the text in front of them or the subjective reality it represents. Creatures like the “grundiboob” and the “crankabeast” are foreign fictions, brought to our attention by the mind of the writer. The likelihood of actually
meeting them anywhere other than the text is low. Rather than invite readers to hide their knowledge of the fictionality of his text, Lee thus encourages them to embrace it and the creative possibilities it inspires. Appreciating his nonsense involves recognizing the way it departs from our knowledge of reality.

In “If You Should Meet,” Lee encourages readers to recognize the fictional nature of his text through his use of factual, logical, and grammatical nonsense. Factually, the grundiboob and crankabeast may not exist, but even if they did, it does not make sense to send a creature “[w]ith feather beds. / In case of rain.” There is no logical connection between these two actions. In fact, rain would probably damage feather beds. By the same token, there does not appear to be any reasonable justification for putting a doughnut on the grundiboob’s snout when one encounters him one way, and whacking his nose when one encounters him going in the other. If there is logic to these actions it is known only to the speaker and the writer he represents. The foreignizing effect of this arbitrary logic is heightened by Lee’s play with language. Grammatically, he foreignizes Standard English when he writes “potamus,” “cotamus,” “talkamus,” and “walkamus.” These strange words are situated in contexts that help readers recognize their familiar roots: “hippopotamus, cot, talk, and walk.” The word “cotamus,” for example, is juxtaposed with the word “sleeping,” which reminds readers that people sleep on cots. Conversely, the word “talkamus” is juxtaposed with the word “sing,” and the word “walkamus” is preceded by the familiar phrase “take him for a.” Relying on these pairings to create familiar associations in readers’ minds, Lee then distorts the correct versions of the words in order to maintain his rhyme scheme. Adding the ending “amus” to each root word, he not only emphasizes the arbitrary nature of word sounds, but also highlights the way he is manipulating language for his own purposes.
These linguistic deviations further demonstrate the way Lee’s poetry undermines some of the conventions of traditional children’s literature. Unlike the texts that “mask the extent to which their childhood is a product of an adult mind” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 213), Lee’s work highlights the presence and subjectivity of the narrator. Explained in Translation terms, Lee does not opt for a domesticating strategy in which “the translator works to make his or work ‘invisible,’ producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion” (Venuti 5). On the contrary, whereas domesticating texts make “the translated text see[m] ‘natural,’ i.e. not translated” (Venuti 5), Lee’s nonsense ensures that readers’ recognize his poem to be a subjective creation. The grundiboob and the crankabeast are unnatural, as is Lee’s use of logic. These elements encourage readers to recognize the illusion created by the poem.

While these last two poems expose Lee’s presence through their nonsensical play with language and logic, others in *Alligator Pie* extend this exploration of the ‘hidden adult’ by alluding to some of the more complex adult-child dynamics underlying the creation of children’s literature. We see such allusions in, “The Special Person.” Lee’s poem begins:

I’ve got a Special Person / At my day-care, where I’m in. / Her name is Mrs. Something / But we mostly call her Lynn. / ‘Cause Lynn’s the one that shows you / How to Squish a paper cup. / And Lynn’s the one that smells good / When you make her pick you up.

*(Lee, *Alligator* 24)*

Based on this opening passage, the poem appears quite normal. The speaker is a child who is talking about an adult caregiver at his daycare. Everything makes sense. We know that Lynn is

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married, that she is a favorite of the speaker, that she is playful (e.g. she likes to squish cups), and she smells good. In fact, the speaker, his daycare experience, and his daycare worker all sound quite standard.

However, as Lee’s poem continues the speaker’s daycare experience transitions from familiar to unfamiliar territory. By the fourth stanza the child states of Lynn: “She bit me on my knee once, ‘cause I / Said she couldn’t scream. / And then I sent her in the hall, / And then we had Ice Cream” (Lee, Alligator 24). This stanza marks a shift from order to disorder. What at first had seemed a clearly defined and ordinary relationship between an adult (i.e., Lynn) and child (i.e., the speaker), has turned into something else, something in which the boundaries between adulthood and childhood have become blurred. Child caregivers, for instance, do not normally bite children on the knees. Not only does such a response seem nonsensical in the context of the poem, it is also forbidden. Biting is a form of attack. From the speaker’s account it appears that Lynn is guilty of child abuse—a considerable offence. At the same time, the child speaker takes on an authoritative role when he punishes Lynn by sending her out into the hall. The adult and child, in this respect, have switched roles.

By switching these roles Lee reveals some of the tensions underlying the adult-child relationship. As his poem demonstrates, what may be normal behavior for a child is not normal behavior for an adult. While children will likely be punished for biting adults, their punishment will not be nearly as severe as the one handed to adults for biting children. Adults are supposed to possess more control over their behavior than children. The humor of Lee’s nonsensical reversal is thus offset by darker implications. An abusive childcare worker is nothing to laugh at.

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Accordingly, Lynn’s unacceptable behavior is foreignizing because it demonstrates how Lee is deviating from accepted understandings of childhood and adulthood. Through his nonsensical distortion of the traditional adult-child relationship, he reminds readers that Lynn and the speaker are fictional creations. In his deviation, however, he destabilizes some of the conventional assumptions governing children’s literature. Just because abusive childcare workers do not often appear in children’s poems does not mean they do not exist.

To an extent then, part of the foreignization in this poem lies in the discomfort it promotes. Child abuse is not a topic most people like to read about, or expect to read about, in a children’s poem. In addition to child abuse, however, Lee’s poem also touches on the topic of polygamy; it concludes:

I guess I’m going to marry Lynn / When I get three or four, / And Lynn can have my Crib, or else / She’ll maybe sleep next door, / ‘Cause Jamie wants to marry Lynn / And live here too, he said. / (I guess he’ll have to come, but he’s / Too Little for a bed.). (Lee, Alligator Pie)79

Here is where the adult writer truly reveals himself. Readers are aware that a child less than three could not be saying the things that this speaker is saying. Thus, the speaker’s seemingly childlike innocence appears false. The strangeness of the poem reminds readers that the speaker (i.e., writer) is an adult masquerading as a child. For this reason, we know that the implications of polygamy are not completely innocent.

To be sure, the speaker’s un-childlike behavior invites an awareness of the more serious connotations of such an arrangement. His relationship with Lynn already seems inappropriate.

The ambivalent adult-child relationship that exists between them demonstrates a crossing of ‘acceptable’ boundaries, and thereby increases readers’ awareness of other boundaries to be crossed. The sharing of beds and the sharing of bed partners carries a sexual connotation, one that is usually censored from children’s texts. Although little children do sometimes say they will marry adults, their statements are viewed as humorous because they are assumed innocent. Children, supposedly, do not know why such a union would be inappropriate. And yet, in order to recognize why the child speaker’s marriage plans are nonsensical, child readers have to have knowledge of the ‘adult’ connotations underlying them. If children do not understand why such an arrangement is inappropriate, then they will read Lee’s text as actually promoting romantic adult-child relationships, in which case, the humor of the poem is lost.

According to Nodelman, all children’s literature possesses an adult subtext or “shadow text” that carries these illicit connotations (*Hidden* 143). Most children’s authors, however, do not like to draw awareness to these shadows within their texts. Colonizing or domesticating children’s writers want to preserve children’s innocence, even if it means convincing children that they are innocent when they are not. Lee, on the other hand, opts for a different writing strategy. His ambivalent characters and irrational logic expose the adult unconscious in his work. Venuti notes that foreignizing translations highlight the “multiple determinants and effects of English-language translation, the multiple hierarchies and exclusions in which it is implicated” (16). Applying this understanding to Lee’s work, we can see how his nonsense reveals the multiple determinants involved in writing for children—the hierarchies that exist between children and adults, including the unspoken rules that govern what aspects of children’s lived realities are, and are not, allowed to be translated.
Lee further exposes the cultural conventions governing adult translations of childhood in “The Sitter and the Butter and the Better Batter Fritter.” In this poem, he uses nonsense to create a foreignizing tongue twister. It begins:

My little sister’s sitter / Got a cutter from the baker, / And she baked a little fritter / From a pat of bitter butter. / First she bought a butter beater / Just to beat the butter better, / And she beat the bit of butter / With the beater that she bought. (Lee, Alligator 60)

Aside from the tongue twister, this passage appears normal. A babysitter is baking a fritter out of butter. Nevertheless, the play with language places an emphasis on sound over sense. The tongue twister is unnatural to say, and consequently, draws attention to the way language is being used to create meaning in this context.

Lee’s play with language is significant, because it reminds readers that there is someone controlling the text. This reminder is especially important as the poem shifts into nonsensical (and forbidden) territory. Logically, it still makes sense that the babysitter cannot eat the first fritter she makes because “the butter was too bitter,” and so decides to make another out of better ingredients and “eat the better batter fritter” (Lee, Alligator 60). After this event, however, the situation becomes more muddled. The speaker states:

But while the better batter / Fritter sat inside the sitter— / Why, the little bitter fritter / made of bitter butter bit her, / Bit my little sister’s sitter / Till she simply disappeared. /
Then my sister came to meet her / But she couldn’t see the sitter— / She just saw the

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bitter butter / Fritter that had gone and et her; / So she ate the butter fritter / With a teaspoonful of jam. (Lee, *Alligator* 61)\(^81\)

In this passage Lee takes the wordplay in his poem to another level by playing with the different connotations of the word “bitter.” Instead of merely referring to the first fritter’s *taste*, he uses the word to instill it with human characteristics, attributing to the fritter *feelings of bitterness*. These feelings of bitterness, in turn, are directed at the sitter who chose to eat a “better” fritter.

The factual and logical nonsense of the poem begins in this moment, where Lee gives the fritter human abilities. In an act of personified vengeance, the fritter eats the sitter. Such an act violates readers’ sense of what is logically acceptable. This violation, however, is taken to the extreme when the speaker’s sister consumes the bitter fritter with her babysitter inside it. True, she *unknowingly* performs this act of cannibalism, but her consumption of her babysitter is still somewhat rebellious. The fact that she has swallowed an authority figure calls her supposed innocence into question. The little girl must be aware of her sitter’s absence, but expresses no concern. Although, in all fairness, the sitter does not express any concern for the little girl in the first half of the poem. On the contrary, she completely ignores her young charge in order to bake herself a treat. The fritter, it seems, is not the only one with a cause for bitterness.

Whether readers choose to read into this poem or not, the fact remains that Lee’s nonsense violates convention, not only on a logical and factual level, but also on a moral level. Cannibalism is not nonsensical in the logical or factual sense; it can be done and does exist. However, in most cultures it is not an appropriate action for children or adults. For this reason, it is not a common feature of western children’s literature. In this respect, Lee’s departure from

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cultural approved notions of childhood contributes to the nonsensical effect of his poem.

“[N]onsense,” Anderson and Apseloff observe, “always implies a contrast to some linguistic, spatial, emotional, or ethical form that is accepted as sense” (4). Cannibalism, from this perspective, may be viewed as an ethical form of nonsense because it contrasts society’s sense of decency. While portrayed in a seemingly harmless and humorous fashion, the cannibalism in Lee’s poem subverts adult conceptions of childhood innocence. “Nonsense,” Anderson and Apseloff write, “is not the absence of sense but a clever subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning” (5). Consequently, in order to recognize why the sister’s consumption of the fritter and her babysitter is nonsensical readers have to identify the various levels on which it foreignizes society’s sense of ‘normal’ child behavior.

5.1.2 Nicholas Knock And Other People

Lee continues his violation of the ‘sense’ governing children’s literature in Nicholas Knock And Other People (1974), the companion volume to Alligator Pie. Though not quite as popular, this second book contains some sophisticated examples of Lee’s nonsensical endeavors. The poem, “To Recognize the Lesser Glunk…,” for example, offers us a glimpse into the ambivalent world of children’s writers, who must balance their knowledge of ‘adult’ and ‘child’ concerns. The poem introduces us to another of Lee’s fictional creatures, this one named “The Lesser Glunk.” It begins:

The Lesser Glunk has two in front / And one behind, for when he’s drunk. / The Speckled Stripes around his eyes / Are plain as day, unless he cries / (Alas, he is a Tearful Thing / And sobs at almost anything, / Such as the Root of \(\pi^2\), / Cab-drivers, Sober or Impaired, / The Bill of Rights, the Goal of Life, / And every kind of Mental Strife). / The Male breathes In and Out all day / While Females breathe the other way, / Which ought to tell
As this first half of the poem demonstrates, Lee is once again playing with the presence and absence of meaning in his text. He uses a lot of words to communicate very little—leaving out key pieces of information. In the first few lines readers are left to wonder what two things the Glunk has in front and what thing he has behind. There is no explanation for why the one behind would help him when he is drunk. Also, there is no logic for why the Glunk would cry at such random things as the root of $\pi^2$ and cab-drivers. The grouping of these seemingly mundane things with the “Bill of Rights” and the “Goal of Life” leads to a trivialization of the latter. Heightening these different nonsensical elements is Lee’s arbitrary use of capitalization, which further emphasizes the unsystematic structure of the poem.

Contributing to the general ambivalence of Lee’s unsystematic poem is its juxtaposition of adult-related and child-related references. While the “Glunk,” as an imagined creature, might have a place in conventional visions of childhood, the references to alcohol abuse are somewhat foreignizing in the context of a children’s poem. Indeed, there are a few references to alcohol in this passage, the first relating to the Glunk himself, and the second relating to cab-drivers. Driving while under the influence is a serious and dangerous offence, one that might cause the Glunk to cry. However, the seriousness of the offence is undercut by the fact that the monster cries at cab-drivers, whether they are “[s]ober or Impaired.” To be sure, the Glunk’s tearfulness

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may be due to his own alcohol abuse; like other drunks he may get weepy when under the influence.

The adult unconscious of Lee’s poem thus makes itself known in the blurring of child/adult boundaries. The Glunk’s substance abuse may not be considered appropriate subject matter for ‘underage’ audiences. Lee, however, increases our awareness of this potential violation when he states that glunks “[v]iew / That Breathing is a strict Taboo.” From a logical standpoint, it does not make sense for breathing to be tabooed because organisms need to do it in order to live. Even so, such irrational thinking draws attention to the ways in which social taboos are arbitrary. Highlighting this fact within the context of a poem that contains potentially objectionable material, Lee inadvertently questions the gate-keeping practices of children’s literature. In this respect, his nonsense creates social commentary that is especially relevant to his work as a children’s poet. The association of tabooed behavior with breathing, while nonsensical, is significant, because it reminds readers that taboos place restrictions on our existence and should be questioned.

Lee develops this social commentary throughout the rest of his poem, which plays with notions of propriety. Continuing in his description of the Glunk, the speaker anticipates readers’ judgments of the creature. The poem concludes:

The Nose looks like an Ironing Board / But Isn’t, so should be ignored / For Glunks wear Very Scanty Clothes / And seldom iron even those. / And watch his Famous Crested Trace / Which rarely lingers in one place / But Wanders, like a Tennis Ball, / And sometimes Isn’t There At All. / You’ll know him by his Blasted Cheek, / His Rumpled Stare, his Warty Squeak - / But here’s the surest clue of all: / A glunk Won’t Answer
when you call! / So if you can’t hear anythink / You’ve seen a Lesser Glunk (I think).

(Lee, Nicholas 39) 

Here nonsense is used to interrogate understandings of decorum. While it might seem inappropriate for the glunks to wear “[v]ery Scanty Clothes,” Lee pokes fun at the people who would find such a fact appalling by adding, “[a]nd seldom iron even those.” The insinuation is that the same people who find it inappropriate for a creature to wear scanty clothes will also find it inappropriate for those clothes to be wrinkled. That scanty clothes are usually considered inappropriate is emphasized through Lee’s capitalization of the words “Very Scanty Clothes.” Amplifying the humor of this passage, however, is the nonsensical suggestion that if the Glunk’s nose was an ironing board, the creature’s scanty clothes would be ironed, and therefore, not quite as scandalous.

There are a number of other linguistic features in this poem that underscore the semantic play taking place. In addition to the arbitrary capitalization already mentioned, there are words like “Lunks” and “anythink.” The word “anythink,” for example, resembles the word “anything,” and is used to maintain the rhyme scheme. Consequently, the end of Lee’s poem demonstrates the way he is sacrificing grammar for aural aesthetic. Along with the rest of his nonsense, this deviation leaves readers to question his use of language. In the process of interpreting his poem, they are left to wonder what the speaker means by adding the word “Lesser” before a made-up creature. Why is the Glunk lesser? Are there glunks that are better than he is? Is he “Lesser” because he drinks? Because he cries? Because he is ugly? How can something be less if it does not exist? Are glunks lesser because they do not exist? By putting the word “Lesser” in front of

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his creation Lee thus draws attention to the way language shapes our impressions of people and things—even our impression of an imagined species.

The next and final Lee poem we will look at also demonstrates how language shapes our impression of things. In “I Have My Father’s Eyes,” Lee takes a figurative saying and makes it literal. The result is quite effective in its foreignization. The poem starts:

My mother took my hand in hers / And as she did she cried, / ‘You have my hair and eyebrows / But you have your Father’s eyes.’ / I soaked them well in acid / To make them firm and round. / I love to see them wobble / As they roll along the ground. / My uncle on my mother’s side / Was speechless in surprise: / ‘She has my teeth and fingernails / But she has her Father’s eyes.’ (Lee, Nicholas 25)

In this poem, the phrase “to have someone’s eyes” does not describe an inherited trait. Instead of resembling her relatives, the speaker has actually taken their body parts. The accompanying illustration shows eyes, ears and teeth in jars. The result is disturbing, because it creates an imagery of disembodiment. Contrary to the image of unity this phrase is meant to invoke (i.e., genetic similarity/closeness) Lee’s nonsensical poem creates a picture of separation and detachment.

This detachment, however, is not just physical. Emotionally, the speaker is quite removed from the situation. She demonstrates no concern for her father, whose eyes she has taken. On the contrary, she expresses delight at her ability to play with them, soaking “them well in acid,” then letting them “wobble” and “roll” on the ground. In this respect, Lee’s poetry possesses the
emotional distance Tigges identifies as characteristic of literary nonsense. As the poem continues, the speaker coolly describes her violent play with her father’s eyes:

I scrubbed them with a toothbrush / Till they began to gleam. / I can’t stand dirty eyeballs. / It makes me want to scream. / An aunt from Athabaska / Said proudly at the table, / ‘She has my ear, the right one. / I left it here last April.’ / Then turning to me sharply / She gave a vicious whack / And roared, ‘You have your / Father’s eyes, / For God’s sake put them back! (Lee, Nicholas 25)\textsuperscript{85}

In addition to soaking her father’s eyes in acid, the speaker also scrubs them with a toothbrush. While this scrubbing is with good intentions (i.e., she wants to clean them), just the thought of such an act is foreignizing. To be sure, the aunt’s rebuke makes it obvious that, even within the nonsensical world of the poem, the speaker’s play with her father’s eyes is inappropriate.

Lee’s nonsense then, is subversive for a number of reasons. Although it is not impossible for a child to play with another person’s eyeballs, it is nonsensical on a social level—it is not an acceptable form of behavior. At the same time, this subversion of social norms is empowering for the child, who is able to do what she wants. While the figurative interpretation of the phrase “to have my father’s eyes” undermines the child’s sense of individuality, her physical play with her father’s eyes enables her to express herself. As the poem demonstrates, there is an underlying claim of possession in saying to someone “you have my ear, smile, eyes, hair etc.” This sense of ownership, however, is reversed through Lee’s literal interpretation of the phrase. Instead of adults possessing the child—laying claim to her different body parts—the child possesses parts of them. Highlighting the ways in which these commonly used statements can be perceived as

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controlling, Lee presents us with a visual depiction of the way adults colonize children. Subverting the figurative sense of these phrases, he allows us to see how such statements position children as strangers in their own bodies.

And yet, by reversing this hierarchical relationship Lee’s nonsense simultaneously destabilizes it. The child in the poem has undermined the figurative head of the patriarchal household (i.e., the father). She has her father’s eyes; she is present and he is conspicuously absent. In fact, she has power over all of the adults mentioned. While they may tell her to do something, she possesses their body parts, and thus has a degree of control over them. In this way, Lee’s poem explores the relationship between language, bodies, and power. At the same time, his nonsense makes his presence conspicuous. We realize that the speaker is a fiction of Lee’s own imagining, for in addition to all of the different adult parts she possesses, she has his subversive wit.

5.2 JonArno Lawson

5.2.1 Black Stars in a White Night Sky

The most recent poet to appear in this study is JonArno Lawson. Unlike Seuss, Silverstein, and Lee, Lawson’s career as a children’s writer began in the 21st century. Although a relatively new arrival to the nonsense scene, he has, as the first chapter already stated, quickly become a well-respected figure in North American children’s poetry. Like all of the other poets mentioned, he has his own unique style and technique. However, unlike Seuss, Silverstein, and Lee, his work lends itself to an older audience of children. Lawson’s nonsense adopts a somewhat philosophical bent, which makes itself known in Black Stars in a White Night Sky (2006), one of his earliest poetry collections. Taking into account the way he differs from the
other poets discussed, we now begin our exploration of his nonsense to discover what it does/does not convey about the adult presence in children’s literature.

The first poem we will look at from *Black Stars in a White Night Sky* is, “The Maple Leaves That Mabel Leaves.” Lawson’s love of wordplay foregrounds itself in the title, which exploits the sound similarity between “Maple” and “Mabel,” as well as the different connotations of “leave.” Here he references both the verb form of the word (i.e., to leave) and the noun form (i.e., leaves off a tree). His linguistic play also extends to orthography. From the title of the poem to the first line, he alters the spelling of “Mabel” to “Mable.” The speaker states:

Mable leaves / the maple leaves / she’s raking in a pile / to make believe / she’s Cleopatra / sailing up the Nile. / You may believe the maple leaves / that Mable leaves / are make-believe / but I believe the maple leaves / that Mable leaves / are real. / And ever since she ran from them / I’ve been the one who’s raking them— / I can’t believe that you believe that / I would dream of faking them. (Lawson, *Black Stars* 19)86

In its play with language and imagination, this poem emphasizes the tension between the real and the unreal. Initially, readers have no reason to suspect that the leaves Mable was raking are not real. They may be aware of the fact that the poem is fictional, but they are educated to believe in the reality it represents (Nodelman, *Hidden* 213). The speaker, however, encourages them to question this reality when he states, “You may believe.” Although the speaker believes the leaves are real he does not assume that the person he is addressing shares his belief. When he indignantly remarks, “I can’t believe that you believe that / I would dream of faking them,” he appears to be reprimanding the addressee for doubting his credibility. At the same time, his

86 *Black Stars in a White Night Sky* © 2006 by JonArno Lawson, Published by Pedlar Press. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used by Permission.
statement can also be interpreted to mean that he does not (i.e., cannot) believe that the addressee doubts him. Either way, the instability of his language highlights his insecurity, which creates uncertainty in the text.

This uncertainty, in turn, draws attention to the dynamics of the reading experience, as does Lawson’s repetition of the word “believe.” The speaker, like the writer of the poem, is presenting someone with a situation that may or may not be real and asking him/her to believe it. While the reality of the situation in question may or may not be true, it is definitely influenced by the subjectivity of the person describing it. Lawson emphasizes the influence of this subjective presence by having him attribute beliefs to the addressee. The poem concludes:

So maybe leave / what you believe / out of this entirely / and imagine for a moment / how badly I must feel / when you say / that you believe / the maple leaves / that Mabel leaves / aren’t real. (Lawson, *Black Stars* 19-21)

The speaker’s reference to his feelings reminds us that he is a person, or at least, he represents a person (i.e., Lawson). We are also aware that he is attempting to manipulate us through the assumptions he is making. In one line, for instance, he tells us to “leave what [we] believe out of this entirely,” only to tell us in the next to imagine how he feels when “[we] say that [we] believe the maple leaves that Mabel leaves aren’t real.” We, of course, have said nothing of the sort. The speaker has been putting ideas and words into our minds and mouths from the very start of the poem. His rambling is nonsensical because he has no basis for the accusations he is making.

The nonsensical nature of the speaker’s imagined conversation, however, reminds readers that there is a writer (i.e., an adult) who is making assumptions about them. In the process of

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translating his ideas to his readers Lawson is making believe they are there. Accordingly, he has beliefs about them just like the speaker in the poem has beliefs about the addressee. The implied reader of the text, in other words, is as much a part of the writer’s imagination as the poem. Drawing attention to this relationship, Lawson’s poetic dialogue exposes his subjective presence. Under the guise of pretending to protect his make-believe world (i.e., defend its legitimacy), he reminds readers of its fictionality.

According to Nodelman, children cannot help but possess an awareness of the fictionality of children’s literature or the fact that adults create it. He observes that it “seems unlikely that the children imagined as readers even for texts with first-person child narrators are expected to actually believe that a child wrote the words” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 212). In this respect, Lawson’s poem may not appear that different from other children’s texts. What separates it from conventional children’s literature, however, is the uncertainty it creates, and how this uncertainty subverts the fictional childhood imagined by the adult author. Most children’s writers, Nodelman comments:

…invite readers to realize that the narrator is the product of an adult imagination, to accept the truthfulness of the adult’s imagining, and, in the very act of acceptance, to acknowledge their own inability to imagine themselves and their own childishness so well. (*Hidden* 212)

Lawson’s nonsense poem, on the other hand, does not instill confidence in the reliability of the speaker or writer. The speaker’s continual second-guessing of the addressee’s trust is disruptive and prevents readers from accepting the truthfulness of the text.

Indeed, readers cannot suspend their disbelief where Lawson’s poem is concerned, because their beliefs are continually being called into question. While the speaker’s overreaction
leads one to doubt his credibility, the subtle wordplay that takes place at the end of the poem reminds readers that they should really doubt the validity of the writer. Once again, Lawson has changed the spelling of the name “Mable” to “Mabel.” This subtle change in the text reminds readers that, like the speaker, Mabel/Mable is the production of Lawson’s imagination. He is the one attempting to manipulate their impressions of her, the situation, and themselves, through his words.

The nonsense in this poem arises from the presence and absence of meaning it creates. The speaker’s irrational accusations generate a sense of uncertainty that destabilizes any coherent stream of thought. We witness a similar kind of uncertainty in Lawson’s poem, “Black Stars in a White Night Sky.” In this case, however, the speaker takes full responsibility for his nonsensical fiction. Instead of merely accusing his audience of not believing in his make-believe world, he invites them into it, thereby acknowledging its departure from reality. The poem goes:

An empty cradle starts to cry; / why does no one stop it? / A cloud of bone goes rolling by / as if somebody’d dropped it. / And now you’d like to know how I / saw black stars in a white night sky. / I set my inward-gazing mind / reversing through my outward eye. /

You can do it, too, now / try. (Lawson, Black Night 25)\textsuperscript{88}

The nonsense in this poem comes from its reversal of the natural order of things. Logically, it does not make sense for an empty cradle to cry, because cradles do not cry—the babies in them do. At the same time, the speaker’s description of the cloud is foreignizing because clouds are soft and bones are hard. The image of black stars in a white night sky is also estranging because

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stars are naturally bright and it is their brightness that causes them to stand out (i.e., shine) in the darkness of the night.

While the speaker’s nonsensical observations draw attention to the subjective nature of the poem, this subjectivity is heightened by his acknowledgement of it. He recognizes that people may not see or comprehend what he sees. This recognition is apparent when he states: “And now you’d like to know how I / saw black stars in a white night sky.” Although the speaker is once again putting words into the mouths of his audience, his acknowledgement of their potential doubt allows him to fully accept responsibility for his imagined world. Unlike the previous poem in which the speaker defends the reality of his statements, here the speaker reveals the way he has dreamt up his world. The phrase, “I set my inward-gazing mind / reversing through my outward eye,” describes the process of imagination. His “inward-gazing mind” has the power to distort or change the way he sees the outside world—to make stars black and night skies white. The speaker thus admits to reversing the channels of information that take place through his senses. Instead of processing the actual information he sees with his eyes, he uses his dream world to inform his perception of reality.

This reversal, though foreignizing in its subjectivity, is accessible to others. The speaker invites readers into his view of reality when he tells them, “You can do it, too, now / try.” Rather than pretend his fiction is representative of reality, Lawson highlights the act of imagination involved in creating it. Nodelman observes that, in most cases, the:

…implied readers of texts of children’s literature tend to be not gullible but adept at pretending to be gullible, not ignorant enough to be easily manipulated but wise enough to know how to be manipulated into pretending to be ignorant. (Hidden 214)
Lawson’s implied readers are not gullible, and he does not ask them to pretend to be. On the contrary, his poem relies on their awareness of the way he is distorting reality to fit his own inclinations. His nonsense calls into question the subjective ways we attempt to make sense of the world. Along with the crying, empty cradle and the cloud of bone, the nonsensical black stars help us interrogate the sources of “light” (i.e., knowledge) that illuminate our understanding of reality.

The poems we have looked at so far are quite introspective, invoking an awareness of both the reader’s and the writer’s viewpoints. Playful and pensive in its subject matter, Lawson’s nonsense indirectly addresses the role language and imagination plays in the shaping of our realities. In this respect, his poems possess a metafictive quality similar to that of On Beyond Zebra!. Contrasting the narrator in Seuss’s text, however, the speakers in Lawson’s poems are not pictured as either childlike or adult-like—they just are. Like Seuss, Silverstein, and Lee, Lawson blurs the boundaries of childhood and adulthood, but unlike them he does not create the pretence of being something he is not. He makes himself transparent by rejecting a common feature of children’s literature: adult invisibility. From a Translation Studies perspective, adult invisibility is analogous to the “illusionism produced by fluent translating” (Venuti 16). This illusionism is problematic because it “masks an insidious domestication of foreign texts, rewriting them in the transparent discourse that prevails in English and that selects precisely those foreign texts amenable to fluent translating” (Venuti 16-17). Where children’s literature is concerned, this fluency means promoting culturally approved notions of childhood. Lawson rejects this fluency by opting for a disruptive writing strategy (i.e., foreignizing); he rejects seemingly “transparent” interpretations of childhood. Consequently, his writing is not
“amenable” to singular interpretations of what it means to be a child or an adult, because it embraces ambiguity.

Part of the significance of Lawson’s nonsense thus lies in the depth of reflection it inspires. A perfect example of this depth can be found in “Being Thoughtless.” This ironically titled poem serves as a great illustration of Saltman’s claim that nonsense is more than “no sense” (68). In it Lawson reminds readers that even nothing can communicate something. The poem goes:

I try to leave all / thoughts behind me, / but they always know. / They start to search / and start to find me / everywhere I go. / Is being thoughtless such a crime? / My thoughts seem / to think so. (Lawson, Black Stars 28)\textsuperscript{89}

The ambiguity of this poem emerges from the figurative and literal play with language taking place. People often say that they will “leave all thoughts behind” as a way of communicating their resolve to think new thoughts that are better suited to their present and future circumstances. However, the idea that the speaker’s thoughts have minds of their owns, that they are capable of searching and finding him (i.e., the thinker), invites a more literal and foreignizing interpretation. He is physically leaving his thoughts behind him and they are chasing after him. The nonsense in the poem thus lies in Lawson’s personification of thought and the implications therein.

This interplay between figurative and literal meaning raises metaphysical questions about the nature of human consciousness. Lawson’s use of personification presents readers with a powerful reversal: normally people (i.e., the thinkers) have control over their thoughts; they act

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upon them, not the other way around. And yet, the fact remains that people often do not have control over their thoughts, that as much as they try to determine what they should think about, they are not always successful. Consequently, this poem begs the question: how do we separate ourselves from our thoughts? How do we conceive of ourselves as human beings without thoughts? Through his play with language Lawson interrogates the way we think about our thinking. Humans, he points out, are incapable of thoughtless existences. To be is to have thoughts. Our very humanity is defined by our ability to think.

Lawson further emphasizes the importance of thought through his play with the concept of thoughtlessness. The word thoughtless can communicate many things, whether it is absentmindedness, inconsiderate behavior, boredom etc. However, in this context, where the speaker is physically separating himself from his thoughts, thoughtlessness might be understood as having no thoughts of one’s own. This particular interpretation is interesting, because it speaks to the importance of thinking for oneself. If people do not have thoughts of their own they can easily be influenced by the thoughts of others. This interpretation of thoughtlessness, more so than absentmindedness or inconsiderate behavior, would appear crime-like to one’s own thoughts, because it deprives them of the right to exist and the speaker of the right to free-thinking.

By focusing on the importance of thought Lawson’s poem encourages readers to think for themselves. The metafictive aspect of his nonsense heightens our awareness of our own ideas, especially those regarding the text. His poem is foreignizing in this respect, because in its allusions to thinking it increases our self-consciousness regarding our own thoughts. Lawson reminds us that the reading experience is a translation of ideas from one mind to another. As readers, we are left to mediate his thoughts and our thoughts on thoughtlessness. Part of
formulating our response to his text involves separating our thinking from his. Consequently, in the process of interpreting the poem it becomes apparent that it is actually not thoughtless, but thoughtful.

Like Lee, one of the ways Lawson disrupts readers’ experiences of his poetry is by leaving key pieces of information out of it. In this respect, his nonsense draws attention to the meaning that is lost in translation. These noticeable and often nonsensical exclusions are foreignizing, because they draw attention to the conditions under which the text was created. We can see the impact of this exclusion in the poem, “It Had to Be Gotten.” The speaker states:

It had to be gotten / and nobody was getting it, / nobody was letting it sink in— / and soon we’ll be forgetting it— / what nobody is getting. / Although it might seem rotten, / I really can’t help betting / that what nobody’s letting / sink in will be forgotten. (Lawson, Black Stars 45)90

The nonsense in this poem derives from the pronoun “it.” Readers are left in the dark as to what “it” references. Consequently, an anxiety emerges from Lawson’s play with language, because we become more and more aware of the fact that we do not know what the speaker is talking about. This tension is magnified by the speaker’s apparent anxiety that “nobody was getting” the thing that “had to be gotten.” Readers are aware that, like the “nobody” in the poem who does not know what he or she should be “getting,” they are also oblivious. The importance of getting whatever important information “it” may be and letting it “sink in” is known only to the speaker.

The lack of information in this poem draws attention to its writer (i.e., Lawson), who is failing to communicate its message effectively. The reasoning underlying why “it” is so

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important remains a mystery. Keeping the situation a mystery, Lawson establishes a humorous
dialectic between the presence and absence of meaning in his text. He is playing with his readers,
and in his play, showing them how he can use language to reveal/conceal information.
Accordingly, his lack of communication creates a sense of disorder that is disorienting for
readers. People, after all, cannot forget information they never knew. Because readers are unsure
as to what “it” is, they do not know what to reference in their attempts to understand the speaker.
Heightening the uncertainty generated by the text, however, is his statement that, “soon we’ll be
forgetting it.” His inclusion of himself in the “we” of the “nobody” group means that he also
does not know what “it” is. In other words, the speaker is attributing importance to something
that he does not understand! Consequently, he does not seem the most reliable source of
information.

Yet another thought-provoking nonsense poem, and the final one we will examine from
*Black Stars in a White Night Sky*, is, “Tickle Tackle Botticelli.” Appearing at the end of
Lawson’s book, it is an appropriate conclusion to the collection, for it ties together the different
themes already discussed. The poem goes:

Tickle tackle Botticelli / chirping cockatoo / chock-a-lick a chocolate drop / kockamamie
moo. / Chomp alompa omphalos / charber choparoo. / Listen up and look around and /
think a little, too. / A click and a clack, / a blip in the black— / a jittery dog / on a dock—
/ can you remember / how you thought / before you / learned to talk? / Consider that,
consider this / consider it on the dot, / that words, however used, / are just the playthings / of a thought. (Lawson, *Black Stars* 116)\(^91\)

In this poem, Lawson once again plays with the relationship between language, make-believe, meaning, and thought. He mixes them together to create a delightfully foreignizing verse. The nonsense is extremely fun to say and half the pleasure of reading it comes from speaking the strange words aloud. Phrases like, “[t]ickle tackle Botticelli / chirping cockatoo” and “chock-a-lick a chocolate drop / kockamamie moo,” roll off the tongue in resounding syllables, made even more enjoyable by the rhymes they produce.

These nonsense sounds, however, are more than just pleasing to the ear, for they provide an important juxtaposition to the few lines of *sense* that appear in the poem. Like the static on an old television set, nonsense sharpens our sensitivity to the meaning that translates through the noise. This meaning appears in the phrases, “[l]isten up and look around and / think a little, too,” and, “can you remember / how you thought / before you / learned to talk? / Consider that, consider this, / consider it on the dot, / that words, however used, are just the playthings of a thought” (Lawson, *Black Stars* 116).\(^92\) Unlike the other lines in the poem, these are intelligible. And yet, they present readers with a kind of ‘chicken and egg’ dilemma. Which came first, thought or language? The speaker tells us to think and asks us if we remember how we thought before we spoke (i.e., possessed language). He then goes on to state that words “are just the

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playthings of thought,” which seems to imply that we must have had thoughts before we had words.

Lawson’s nonsense, in this respect, presents us with a bit of a paradox. We need words to voice our thoughts, and yet, we need thoughts to put meaning into words. His poem thus takes us back to the earlier question of human consciousness and its relation to language. The lack of an answer, however, once again reminds readers that there are some things that ‘will not be got.’ There are, it seems, aspects of reality that are impossible to make sense of, no matter how hard we try. Even so, this does not mean that they are meaningless. As Lawson’s nonsense suggests, part of the mystery of being human involves pondering these untranslatable aspects of our existence. There are many ways to interpret his poems and the questions they pose, just as there are many ways to interpret the universe. Language and thought, he points out, should be played with. In acknowledging the way he uses words to play with his readers’ thoughts, Lawson simultaneously invites them to play with his ideas. Words may be his playthings, but readers are definitely his playmates.

5.2.2 Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box

Directing our eyes away from the black stars in the white night sky, we now turn our attention to Lawson’s other poetry collection, Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box (2012). Discussions of human consciousness are usually followed by a descent of some kind and this exploration of nonsense is no different. In keeping with the existential questions already discussed, Lawson’s award-winning collection represents an interesting assortment of philosophical inquiries.

Like most of the poems in his book, “The Truth” is brief but effective in its play with meaning. The speaker states: “There is an important truth; / that seems both consistent and
constant to me: / the truth is that the truth is never / what anybody wants it to be” (Lawson, *Box 21*). In this poem, Lawson showcases the subjective nature of truth. The speaker uses the word truth to convey an observation he has made about human truths—a meta-truth (i.e., factual realities). The nonsense of the poem arises from Lawson’s play with the presence and absence of meaning. Truth is an abstract concept; a concept the speaker exploits when he says it is “never what anybody wants it to be.” Through this statement the concept of truth is made even more abstract: the speaker defines what truth is, by what it is not. According to him, truth can be any undesired aspect of reality. Accepting his claim thus requires that we also accept the fact that he does not want to believe in the truth he has just relayed. In this way, the speaker’s logic circles back to encompass the truth he is sharing.

The fact that the concept of truth remains abstract, however, opens it up to interpretation. The speaker’s definition of truth presents readers with an infinite number of possible meanings. In order to test out the ‘sense’ of his theory, readers are forced to think back on their own experiences to verify whether or not they have been disappointed with the realities they have experienced. And yet, truly testing out the speaker’s theory means taking into account the various perspectives involved in different situations. What may have been a disappointing truth for one person may not have been disappointing for another. For example, I may be disappointed at the truth that I did not win the lottery, but this is certainly not the case for the person who won the million-dollar jackpot. Hence, it is difficult to accept the speaker’s generalization that the truth is “never what anybody wants it to be” as fact. While this statement may resonate with readers on some levels (i.e., everyone has been disappointed), it may depart from their

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experience on others (i.e., times when life has met their expectations). In this respect, Lawson’s words carry a degree of truth. His poem is foreignizing because it questions the possibility of definitive truths by impressing upon readers the infinite number of subjective truths that can and do exist.

Highlighting the elusiveness of truth, Lawson’s nonsensical poem interrogates the concept of a singular reality. While the speaker’s understanding of truth is “consistent and constant to [him],” it is not necessarily representative of the rest of the population’s understanding. In this way Lawson uses the notion of consistency to expose the inconsistent nature of truth and the potential problems of collective truths. Like sense and nonsense, his poem is neither completely right nor completely wrong. The same realization applies to children’s literature. Adults’ perceptions of children may hold some truth, but also some falsities. One size of childhood does not fit all, just as one definition of truth does not fit all. Indeed, what adults believe to be accurate representations of childhood, children may find to be inaccurate. Adults, Nodelman and Reimer observe, do not want to believe children are a certain way (94-95). Alternatively, children may not always want to believe in the childhood adults imagine for them. Using the arbitrary logic of Lawson’s poem, who is right? Who is telling the truth? No one, it appears, because one person cannot speak for everyone’s experience.

Searching through Lawson’s box of metaphysical toys, we find next to truth, the concept of time. In “I Broke the Bones of One O’Clock,” Lawson plays with the idea that time is a tangible thing. The poem goes:

I tried to gather time, a second at a time – / but when the clock began to chime / it poured the seconds out. I broke the bones / of one o’clock and hid them in my father’s sock, / but
when he pulled his stocking on, / he said, ‘What’s this in here, my son? / What are you doing with your time? / Don’t waste it, precious one.’ (Lawson, Box 46)\(^4\)

Here Lawson employs the phrase to “gather time” in the physical sense. The idea is nonsensical because time is not something a person can physically grasp. When the speaker says that he “broke the bones of one o’clock” readers know that such a statement is factually incorrect, because time has no bones to break. The fact that the speaker places these bones in his father’s sock, however, plays with the notion of “Father Time,” the idea that there is someone in control of time, monitoring how we use it.

And yet, while the concept of Father Time is familiar, the idea that we can hide time is both nonsensical and foreignizing, because we can perceive it passing around us at every moment. The reality that we cannot physically hide time or ourselves from it, underscores the father’s admonition, “‘Don’t waste it, precious one.” Lawson, however, adds new meaning to the commonly used phrase through his use of the word “one,” which can be interpreted to mean either the speaker (i.e., the son), or the one o’clock that was broken. Readers are left to decide whether the speaker or time itself is the precious thing that will be wasted. In this way, Lawson illustrates how people are wound up in time and time wound up in people. We are all, his poem suggests, part of the same universal mechanism.

By employing nonsense to address a common trope of children’s literature, that is, being ‘good boys and girls’ and ‘not wasting time,’ Lawson avoids the overt didacticism of other authors. Highlighting the metaphysical nature of time through his physical description of it, he reminds readers that they cannot hold onto it, that time is out of their control. Indeed, the

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speaker’s problems begin when he tries to “gather time.” In pointing out that time is not something to be stored Lawson reminds children that they are part of it. The speaker wastes time by trying to save it/hide from it rather than exist in it. Equipping readers with this new awareness, Lawson simultaneously reminds them that he is playing with their time. In fact, his poem engages multiple dimensions of time: there is the culturally accepted notions of time he is foreignizing; the time he spent writing the poem; and the time readers invest in reading it.

Lawson plays with other clichés surrounding the notion of time in his poem, “Seize the Day.” Keeping with its theme, this poem is effective in its brevity. Indeed, it is almost proverb-like in its structure. The speaker states: “The sensitive day / will bite the hand that seizes it – / and the sensible hand / will find some briefer moment that pleases it” (Lawson, Box 47). Here, as in the previous poem, Lawson takes a commonly used phrase (i.e., “Seize the Day”) and turns it on its head. Although its message is completely different, his poem bears some resemblance to the idiom: ‘Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.’ Linguistically, Lawson plays with the sound similarity between the words “sensitive” and “sensible,” exploiting their different connotations. He personifies the day, giving it feelings (i.e., it is sensitive) and the ability to resist being seized.

This resistance can imply many things, least of which that it is impossible to seize a day by physically taking hold of it. Lawson qualifies this statement when he writes “and the sensible hand will find some briefer moment that pleases it” (Lawson, Box 47). Metonymy is employed in this line, where the hand is used to represent the person it belongs to. More importantly, however, it is used to illustrate the relative proportions between a day and a moment, as well as a

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hand and a person. The part to whole ratio created by these metonymic juxtapositions imparts a ‘pick on someone your own size’ kind of message. In a nonsensical turn of events, the impossibility of seizing a day is not attributed to the fact that one cannot seize time, but rather, that the amount of time in a day is too big for a hand to hold onto. The “sensible” hand, that is, the rational hand, will seize a “briefer moment.” Time, the speaker suggests, can and should only be seized in small amounts.

Of course, Lawson’s use of the word “sensible” emphasizes the nonsensical nature of the poem, which not only attributes human characteristics to a measure of time (i.e., a day), but also implies that time can be grasped. “Essentially dyadic,” Anderson and Apseloff observe, “nonsense consists of humorous absurdities with double or split meanings, of contrasts, reversals, and mirror images” (5). In order to appreciate how Lawson is playing with a cultural cliché, readers have to be aware of the ways he is distorting it. Consequently, we can see how Lawson is “seizing” hold of language to twist its meanings. By subverting the original phrase he presents readers with a new interpretation of it. He allows them to see the words from a different perspective, one that highlights the way he has changed the phrase to mean something new.

Like most nonsense poets, Lawson does not keep his love of wordplay a secret. We have already seen the way he uses nonsense to increase readers’ awareness of the creative possibilities language holds. Lawson’s fascination with language, however, is especially evident in his poem, “I Played with Toys.” The speaker states:

I played with toys, and later, / I learned to play inside them. / Inside them was the only way to keep them, / because I couldn’t find a way to hide them. / While inside them, I
learned to play without them / and within them (so without them) / I no longer thought
about them. (Lawson, *Box 47*)

The speaker’s descent into nonsense is slow, but steady. The first line appears normal, but the
second requires some contextualization. While most toys are too small to play inside of, there are
some child toys, such as tree houses, and ‘grownup’ toys such as cars, that the speaker might
play within. For this reason, he might not be speaking nonsense. The word “later” implies the
passing of time and as people grow up they are expected to stop playing with toys. Logically,
there is still a plausible explanation for the speaker’s words.

The latter half of the poem, on the other hand, diminishes the chances of a logical
explanation. Lawson’s play with the concepts of “within” and “without” creates a disorderly
mise en abyme effect. First the speaker is within the toys, but somehow while within the toys he
learns to play without them. The logic here is confusing, because one cannot play inside a toy
without a toy, unless, of course, this play is taking place in one’s imagination. Perhaps the
speaker is imagining he is inside a toy, in which case he would not need the physical toy.
However, the very act of imagining playing inside a toy requires that he think of that toy. Hence,
it does not make sense for him to “no longer think about [the toys]” if he is playing with them
physically or imaginatively (Lawson, *Box 47*). In this respect, Lawson’s logic collapses,
leaving readers to wonder what the speaker is trying to say. Like all literary nonsense, the poem
has no singular point.

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Indeed, it is the lack of meaning or a specific point that draws attention to the way Lawson is playing with words. If we think back to his previous poem, “Tickle-Tackle Botticelli,” we recall the speaker’s observation that, “words are the playthings of a thought.” With this statement in mind we can see how the nonsense of “I Played with Toys” reminds us that words are toys for writers: Lawson is playing with different meanings through his use of language. In fact, from a linguistic perspective, it is possible for him to dwell inside his toys (i.e., words).

Words can be used to create images, but once created, images no longer require words. Viewed in this light, it might actually be possible to play without words once one arrives at the ineffable meanings they direct us to. From a Translation perspective, Lawson’s nonsense can and has taken us to the point of untranslatability, where we begin to see a world beyond the text. Thus, while this poem is technically nonsensical, it is not senseless. On the contrary, it just possesses more sense than we are used to.

By this point in the study we recognize that Lawson’s wordplay possesses a complexity that lends itself well to philosophical investigations about the nature of language, thought, and human existence. There are some poems, however, where the primary pleasure of his nonsense derives from its chaotic play with word sounds. Such fun can be found in “Greenblatt, Goldblatt, Grenby, Grinch.” The poem goes: “Greenblatt, Goldblatt, Grenby, Grinch. / Schoolyard, scrapyard, inchworm, inch. / Obadiah would you try a little bitta jumbalaya? / Spoonful, capful, peanut-butter pinch!” (Lawson, *Box* 27). In this poem, Lawson plays with lists of things. The alliteration of “Greenblatt, Goldblatt, Grenby, Grinch,” is delightful in its weirdness. While fun to say, it makes little sense. Adding to the strangeness of the poem is the juxtaposition of the

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“schoolyard” with a “scrapyard,” and an “inchworm” with an “inch.” These words create an interesting contrast of images that highlights the disorderly nature of the rhyme. The schoolyard and the scrapyard are, after all, messy places. Children wreak havoc on the playground and the scrapyard is a demolition ground of broken parts. Contrast these hyperactive images with the slow movements of an inchworm and we can see how Lawson has established corresponding dialectics of order-disorder and slow-fast in his poem.

Along with the alliterative “G” names, these unusual juxtapositions highlight the arbitrariness of the author’s word choice. The combination of people, places, and things, juggled together in sentence fragments, reminds readers of the person doing the juggling. Lawson is having fun with words and it is his fun that translates through the poem. He increases the playfulness of his rhyme by throwing in a random question. “Obadiah would you try a little bitta jumbalaya?” is grammatically correct (aside from the spelling of the word “bitta” instead of “bit of”), but taken out of context it does not make sense. How does Obadiah relate to the schoolyard, scrapyard, or Goldblatt, Grenby and Grinch? Likewise, how do the lines, “[s]poonful, capful, peanut-butter pinch!” fit into the picture? True, they might be seen as a way of measuring Obadiah’s jumbalaya, but we do not even know where Obadiah fits in! Taken in its entirety then, there is no logic holding the poem together. The syllables crash into each other in a relentless rhythm, spilling meaning all over the place. In the process, Lawson’s nonsense shows readers how words can communicate many things and nothing all at the same time.

An interesting observation to make about Lawson’s poem, however, is that it resembles the kind of rhyme one might hear children chanting in the schoolyard. Indeed, the rhythm of the verse, the listing of items, and the fun sounding words lend themselves well to jump rope. Compare, for instance, Lawson’s poem to: “Eeny, meeny, pasadini, / Alla, balla, boomerini, /
Archie, parchie, liverarchie, / And your brother George” (Knapp and Knapp 132) or to: “Pinkety, pinkety, / Thumb to thumb, / Wish a wish and it’s sure to come. / If yours comes true, / Mine will come true, / Pinkety, pinkety, / Thumb to thumb” (Booth 64). Both of these rhymes, like Lawson’s, contain an intelligible sentence or sentence fragment, juxtaposed with nonsensical lists. Contrasted with these children’s rhymes, we can see how his poem incorporates various elements of child lore. His nonsense, while chaotic, appears carefully crafted to resemble the wordplay children engage in. There is a resonance between his reference to the “schoolyard” and the schoolyard quality of his poem.

Like all of the nonsense poets discussed then, Lawson is not good at hiding. He not only alerts readers to the way he is playing with language, but also to the way they use language. His poetry promotes a consciousness of the power of words, whether it is in the establishing or surpassing of logical boundaries, the hierarchical relationship between adults and children, or the way language frames our understanding of truth, reality, and ourselves. While he demonstrates how language can be used to create meaning for different purposes in different contexts, he simultaneously shows it to be inadequate in its ability to accurately describe the complexity of the world around us. Words carry many meanings and it is only by subjectively negotiating them that we can attempt to make any sense out of the language we encounter. As author of the text and translator of reality, Lawson thus uses nonsense to emphasize the untranslatability of lived experiences—including those of children. His experience is his experience and his words are his words, but they are also his toys. Presenting his poems as toys, he invites children to play with his thoughts and make whatever sense of them that they like.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Having finished this North American exploration of children’s nonsense verse, we now return to the place of inquiry where it began. In this concluding chapter I revisit my two research questions and present a summary of my findings, as reached through the analysis provided by the previous chapters. My discussion of these findings will reflect on:

1) Whether the nonsense verse of these poets exposes or conceals the adult presence within children’s literature.

2) How this exposure or concealment affects our understanding of the liberating effects of children’s nonsense verse.

While my discussion of the first question will refer back to the conclusions reached through my close readings of each poet’s work, my answer of the second will attempt to situate these conclusions within the previous nonsense scholarship already discussed, as well as that surrounding Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, Dennis Lee, and JonArno Lawson. Doing so will allow me to outline the ways this study contributes to previous research by offering new and valuable insight into children’s nonsense literature.

The last portion of this chapter will address the limitations of this thesis and its implications for further research. I will end my discussion of nonsense verse by proposing some possible directions for future study.

6.1 A Summary of the Hidden Adult

This study examined the nonsense verse of four North American children’s poets to determine whether or not it exposes or conceals the adult presence of children’s literature, what Nodelman identifies as the “hidden adult” (Hidden 206). Through the critical lenses of Translation Theory and Postcolonial Theory I explored the foreignizing elements of each poet’s
nonsense to see if he does, or does not, make his subjective presence known in his text. This exploration involved considering the way nonsense verse draws attention to the adult unconscious/shadow texts\textsuperscript{100} of children’s literature. Nonsense verse, in this case, was viewed as a subgenre of literary nonsense, which was defined as possessing four attributes: the presence and absence of meaning, creation of reality by means of language, the element of play, and emotional detachment (Tigges, \textit{Literary Nonsense} 257). In my analysis of their poetry I considered how Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, Dennis Lee, and JonArno Lawson created these different effects through their subversion of factual, logical, and grammatical\textsuperscript{101} norms. Upon identifying the nonsensical elements in the primary texts I then considered how they function like foreignizing translations to remind children:

1) Of the adult writer’s subjective presence and;
2) The fact that children’s literature and the childhood it presumes to represent are adult \textit{interpretations} of children’s lived experiences.

The question I attempted to answer through my analytical close reading of each poet’s work was:

1. Does nonsense verse expose or conceal the adult presence within children’s literature?

Returning to this question, I now present a summary of my findings. They are organized according to the order in which I explored each poet’s work.

\textbf{6.1.1 Dr. Seuss}

In my analysis of \textit{On Beyond Zebra!} and \textit{I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!} I found that Seuss’s nonsense exposes the hidden adult presence within children’s literature. His simultaneously adult-like/childlike characters draw attention to the ambivalence of the genre. In

\textsuperscript{100} See Nodelman, \textit{The Hidden Adult}, p. 199.
\textsuperscript{101} Charlton identifies three forms of nonsense: logical, factual, and grammatical (352).
each book the older character is the narrator, who is imparting wisdom to the younger. Instead of reinforcing conventional norms regarding language use and childhood, however, these older narrators use nonsense to subvert Standard English and the traditional forms of language instruction associated with it. In *On Beyond Zebra!*, for instance, the narrator’s made-up letters demonstrate to readers the arbitrary nature of language. Seuss’s foreignizing use of English letters to create an *imaginary* alphabet, representative of *imaginary* creatures, reveals the way he is playing with language, manipulating it for his own purposes. Rather than encourage children to imitate standardized language practices, he encourages them to be creative with their language use. Alternatively, in *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*, the older cat’s description of all the nonsensical things he can read with his eyes open allows readers to see how language affects our view of the world. Combined with the illustrations, which emphasize the unreliability of the narrating cat, Seuss’s nonsense reveals the way people use language to influence each other.

Because of its departure from cultural norms, I found Seuss’s nonsense to be foreignizing. He violates logical, factual, and grammatical knowledge in his play with language, and this play highlights his role as writer of the text. Amplifying readers’ awareness of Seuss’s subjective presence is the metafictional nature of his nonsense. The focus on language and literacy draws attention to the reading experience, thereby illuminating the interaction taking place between the text and the reader. The dialogue between the two characters in each book is representative of Seuss’s interaction with his implied reader. Like the narrators in his stories, he is also trying to introduce people to a new perspective on language. And yet, unlike conventional children’s literature, his foreignizing nonsense helps us see the *subjectivity* of the ideas it conveys.
By exposing the subjectivity of his text, Seuss thus opens it up to other interpretations, including those of his child audience. Indeed, at the end of *On Beyond Zebra!* he directly solicits children’s opinions through the question he poses. His acknowledgement of their presence simultaneously reinforces their awareness of his own. In this way Seuss employs nonsense to highlight the dynamics of children’s literature, which involves the translation of adult ideas about childhood to *children*. At the same time, he attempts to undermine the power dynamics of this transaction by asking readers to re-interpret his ideas. In the process of reading his text they are viewed as agents of information, not passive recipients.

### 6.1.2 Shel Silverstein

Similar to Seuss, Silverstein also employs nonsense as a way of highlighting his subjective presence within the text. In my analysis of several poems found within *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *A Light in the Attic*, and *Runny Babbit*, I explored the way his nonsense draws attention to the hidden adult. In the process, I discovered that Silverstein’s nonsense verse invites children’s awareness of the exclusionary elements of children’s literature. Like all literary nonsense, his poetry plays with the presence and absence of meaning. The implied child readers of his texts are assumed to know things that lie outside the realm of conventional childhood. Appreciating Silverstein’s poetry as nonsense requires that children have access to forbidden ‘adult’ knowledge and an awareness of the cultural situation responsible for its censorship. Recognizing that children know more than adults would like them to, his nonsense is foreignizing because it subverts conventional notions of childhood innocence.

Another way Silverstein’s nonsense draws attention to his adult presence is through the uncertainty it creates. The ambiguity of poems like “Enter This Deserted House,” “The Worst,” and “Skinny,” calls into question the reliability of the speaker and the writer he represents.
Silverstein undermines his authority as an expert on children’s experiences by exposing the ambivalence of children’s literature and the adult-child relationship. As I found in my analysis of “Skin Stealer,” “Chester,” and “A Bittle laby for Runny?,” he destabilizes the boundaries that separate adult and child behavior. Like Seuss, his play with cultural norms is amplified through his foreignizing use of language. This play is best seen in “Poemsicle” and the spoonerisms of Runny Babbit. Through his wordplay Silverstein exposes the way he is manipulating the text to influence readers’ perceptions of reality. In doing so, he embraces and exploits the ambiguity created by nonsense, thereby encouraging readers to question the ‘sense’ underlying their view of the world, themselves, and children’s literature.

6.1.3 Dennis Lee

Similar to his American counterparts, Dennis Lee also uses nonsense to undermine cultural assumptions about children. His presence is made visible by his deviation from Standard English, as well as his blurring of the boundaries separating children and adults. He foreignizes familiar Canadian artifacts (e.g. Ookpik) and landmarks (e.g. Niagara Falls) through his nonsensical descriptions, thus alerting readers to the subjective nature of his poetry. Poems like “If You Should Meet” and “The Lesser Glunk” highlight the arbitrary nature of language and the unlimited possibilities it holds for imaginative creation. Lee’s nonsensical creatures are made more nonsensical by the logic used to describe them. He employs factual, logical, and grammatical nonsense in his invention of different species.

At the same time, Lee’s nonsense extends beyond these three levels to encompass ethical forms, such as cannibalism. In “The Sitter and the Butter and the Better Batter Fritter” a little girl consumes her babysitter. Although this consumption occurs within the context of a nonsensical situation, it nevertheless carries subversive implications. Likewise, in “I Have My Father’s Eyes”
Lee’s literal interpretation of a figurative phrase upsets the power dynamics of conventional children’s literature. Playing with the body parts of the adults around her, the speaker has a degree of authority over them. Like Lee’s other deviations, this nonsensical distortion of the adult-child relationship is foreignizing, for it reminds readers of his presence within the text and the way he is deviating from accepted social norms.

6.1.4 JonArno Lawson

While similar to the other poets in this study, I discovered JonArno Lawson’s nonsense verse to be philosophically complex in its interrogation of reality. Like Lee and Silverstein, one of the ways Lawson draws attention to his subjective presence within his poetry is through the uncertainty he creates. His nonsense destabilizes the potential meanings to be found in the text, alerting readers to the fictional nature of the world it represents. In poems like, “The Maple Leaves that Mabel Leaves,” and, “Black Stars in a White Night Sky,” he exposes the dynamics of the reading experience by calling into question the subjectivities of the speaker and the addressee. Here, as in elsewhere, Lawson’s linguistic play highlights the way he uses language to influence readers’ perceptions of reality. In the manner of Seuss, the metafictive element of his nonsense is heightened by its subject matter. Poems such as, “Being Thoughtless,” and, “The Truth,” increase readers’ awareness of the different viewpoints implicit in the reading situation.

One of the primary ways Lawson alerts readers to the cultural dynamics underlying the creation of his poetry is through his omission of information. This omission, like other manifestations of his nonsense, is foreignizing. As we saw in the poem, “It Had to Be Gotten,” the lack of detail creates a disruptive reading experience, one that reminds readers that writers are in control of the information that is disseminated through literature. The arbitrary reasoning underlying Lawson’s exclusion of knowledge further exposes the subjective power authors wield.
as interpreters of reality. Indeed, his lack of reasoning encourages children to question his fiction and his ability to accurately represent their experiences.

Another foreignizing element of Lawson’s nonsense is his literal interpretation of figurative phrases. In “I Broke the Bones of One O’Clock” and “Seize the Day” he alters our understanding of commonly used sayings, opening them up to new interpretations. As demonstrated in “Tickle Tackle Botticelli,” “I Played with Toys,” and “Greenblatt, Goldblatt, Grenby, Grinch,” his deviation from cultural norms manifests in his play with language. Each of these poems demonstrates how nonsense can say many things, and nothing in particular, all at the same time. Thus, like the other poets mentioned, Lawson also uses nonsense to increase readers’ awareness of the ways we think about and use language. In doing so, he simultaneously draws attention to the way he is using and interpreting language to different effect.

6.2 The Liberating Effects of Nonsense Verse

Having confirmed that the foreignizing nonsense verse of Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson does reveal the hidden adult in children’s literature, I will now consider what this insight contributes to previous research on nonsense, particularly the scholarship surrounding these poets’ work. In other words, it is time to answer my second research question:

2) How does this exposure of the hidden adult affect our understanding of the liberating effects of children’s nonsense verse?

In the Literature Review provided in Chapter Two I already offered a glimpse into the discourse of liberation surrounding the genre of literary nonsense. A common observation among scholars is that nonsense, in its subversion of everyday logic, frees us from old perspectives and introduces us to new ideas (Sewell, “Nonsense,” 144-145). Accordingly, in its deviation from
cultural norms, nonsense has also been seen to produce social criticism and function as a form of rebellion against authority structures (Geller 58, 87; Saltman 64).

The scholarship surrounding Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson, though relatively scant, participates in this discourse of liberation. While an entire area of Seuss scholarship is devoted to “whether or not Seuss’s nonsense liberates the child reader” (Nel 11-12), the available scholarship on Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson displays similar trends. Scholars have considered Seuss’s nonsense liberating in its antiauthoritarian plotlines (Lanes 46); its empowering representation of children (Lanes 49, 115); its modeling of critical literacy practices (Roth 145); and its attempt to “democratize reading” by celebrating the imaginative power of the individual and civic engagement (Wolosky 1; Pease 151). Silverstein’s nonsense, on the other hand, is noted primarily for its honesty; his subversive poetry is considered liberating in its willingness to address forbidden topics (MacDonald 272-273).

Similar to their American counterparts, Lee and Lawson’s nonsense is also spoken of in liberating terms. According to Nodelman, Lee’s nonsense frees us from the assumption that “children act one way and grownups another” (“Speaking,” 9). At the same time, Lee’s nonsense, like that of Seuss (Nel 28), is thought to “liberate the imagination from transparency,” alerting children to the ideological nature of language (McGillis 45). Akin to the other poets mentioned, Lawson’s nonsense is considered liberating because it deviates from convention. Although there has not been a lot of research done on his work, scholars have noted that he “bravely engages with the dark side of childhood” and avoids “implicit or explicit moralizing” (Sorby et. al 278). Factoring these insights into our general discussion of these poets’ nonsense verse, the discourse of liberation surrounding their work addresses: its antiauthoritarian
messages; its forbidden content; its subversive representations of childhood; and its emphasis on creative and critical engagement with language.

In my close readings of each poet’s work I reached similar conclusions to those of the above scholars; however, my findings add to the scholarship by providing a more nuanced discussion of the way nonsense verse upsets the power dynamics of children’s literature. This was accomplished through the theoretical framework of the study, which surfaced the cultural assumptions and hierarchical processes underlying the creation of children’s literature. I argue that to fully understand the liberating possibilities nonsense verse holds for children, one has to account for the way it supports/disrupts the colonizing processes of children’s literature. Thus, while the above scholars have recognized the way nonsense subverts cultural perceptions of childhood, they do not specifically address the way this subversion calls into question the presence of the adult writer and his/her authority as the adult ‘translator’ (i.e., interpreter) of children’s reality.

In other words, one has to remember that Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson are still adults writing for a child audience. As much as they try to advocate for children or disrupt the adult-child power dynamic of children’s literature, their status as children’s writers inevitably reinforces it. Explained in translation terms, a foreignizing writing strategy may alert readers to the fact that they are reading a translation, but this does not change the fact that the text is a translation. Likewise, the nonsense verse of Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson, while radical in its deviation from convention, is still children’s literature, and as such, retains a colonizing agenda. Each poet is interpreting childhood for children. Consequently, what I found most liberating about their nonsense verse is not its unconventional representations of childhood, but that, like foreignizing translation, it exposes the act of interpretation taking place. By making
their subjectivity conspicuous through their nonsense, Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson alert readers to the way they are trying to influence/manipulate children through their interpretations of childhood. In doing so they reveal the colonizing agenda of children’s literature and allow children the space to question it. Exploiting the ideological nature of language and the arbitrary institutions of power underlying its standardization, they encourage children to challenge their authority as adult experts on childhood.

Hence, I suggest that the liberating potential of these poets’ nonsense verse lies in the way it asks to be read. Encouraging readers to question the legitimacy of their fictions, Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson assume a different implied reader than that of conventional children’s literature. Instead of counting on children’s ability to feign ignorance, these writers draw upon children’s knowledge of the shadow texts underlying the genre. Appreciating their nonsense as nonsense requires that readers understand the ways it violates logical, factual, grammatical, ethical, and cultural boundaries. Assuming a different implied reader, nonsense thus invites a different kind of reading. In this respect, as in others, it resembles foreignizing translation. “The notion of foreignization,” Venuti notes, “can alter the way translations are read as well as produced because it assumes a concept of human subjectivity that is very different from the humanist assumptions underlying domestication” (24). A foreignizing translation does not assume that it can accurately capture the essence of the reality it attempts to convey; by exposing its status as a translation, it simultaneously acknowledges its limitations.

According to Venuti, the kind of reading promoted by foreignization can be applied to domesticating translations. He calls this method “symptomatic reading,” an interpretative

\[102\] In *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman discusses how conventional children’s literature assumes an implied reader who is willing to pretend to be ignorant. See p. 214.
approach that “locates discontinuities at the level of diction, syntax, or discourse that reveal the
translation to be a violent rewriting of the foreign text, at once dependent on and abusive of
domestic values” (Venuti 29, 25). In drawing attention to the translator’s subjective rewriting of
the foreign text, symptomatic reading “can be said to foreignize a domesticating translation by
showing where it is discontinuous” (Venuti 29). In many respects, symptomatic reading
resembles what education scholars identify as critical literacy, the “use of the technologies of
print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule
systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke qtd. in Luke 5). To be
sure, in as much as symptomatic reading draws attention to the social conditions underlying the
translator’s work, including the cultural hierarchies in which it is implicated, it is a form of
critical literacy. Extending the concept of foreignization to nonsense verse, we can see how it
also promotes critical readings. While critical literacy “entails an understanding of how texts and
discourses can be manipulated to represent and, indeed, alter the world” (Luke 9), nonsense
invites a similar understanding by highlighting the arbitrary nature of language and the
subjective presence of the adult writer. The implied reader of nonsense is not an ignorant reader,
but a knowledgeable reader, one who can identify how the text deviates from cultural norms,
subverts the logic that governs our everyday lives, and upsets the institutions of power that
attempt to regulate language use. This reader position encourages children to recognize the way
the adult writer uses language to influence their perceptions of the world, reality, and themselves.

The connection between nonsense verse and critical literacy is not entirely new. Rita
Roth touches on the relationship between the two in her examination of Seuss’s work. However,
while Roth maintains that Seuss’s characters model critical literacy practices (145), I suggest that
his nonsense not only models, but also attempts to engage children in critical reading. Allan Luke observes that:

[I]n addition to questions of how a text might reflect learners’ life worlds and experiences, [critical literacy] also teaches them how the selection of specific grammatical structures and word choices attempt to manipulate the reader. (8)

As my close readings of their nonsense suggest, Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson all highlight how “word choices” influence our perception of the world. Their play with language destabilizes our understanding of cultural boundaries. Using nonsense as a means through which to interrogate our ‘sense’ of reality, they encourage us to question the various sources of that ‘sense.’ In other words, their nonsense undermines the authority of those who place limitations on our existence—the people who attempt to define reality for us.

Where children’s literature is concerned, these poets’ nonsense verse thus undermines the authority of the adults who attempt to represent children’s reality. Upsetting the boundaries between adults and children, Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson subvert the notion of childhood, exposing it as a subjective interpretation of children’s experiences. Drawing readers’ attentions to the exclusionary nature of children’s literature, their nonsense calls into question the way adults use language and literature to control information and influence children’s behavior. Consequently, in exposing the ambivalent status of the children’s writer these poets simultaneously call into question their ability to adequately represent children’s lived experiences. Drawing attention to the fictionality of their texts, they remind readers that they belong to the same group of adults they are rebelling against. Accordingly, in as much as Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson try to upset the power dynamic of children’s literature, they ultimately admit to reinforcing it. Their admission, however, opens up space for child readers’
critical questioning of the institution of children’s literature and the adult writer who participates in it. Indeed, it is by encouraging this questioning that these poets expose the hidden adult and disrupt the colonizing agenda of children’s literature.

6.3 Limitations

This study was limited by its focus on four Anglophone North American children’s nonsense poets. In selecting these four, I overlooked a number of other excellent North American children’s poets, as well as those from other continents. Due to the scope of this study my analysis of each poet’s nonsense verse did not delve deeply into poetics, or consider in any great detail the visual nonsense that accompanies each poet’s work. Consequently, a more extensive study could have 1) marked out the scansion of each poem; 2) taken into better consideration the different modes of nonsense at work within these books (e.g. illustration) and; 3) adopted a wider sample of international children’s nonsense verse.

Another limitation of this study was my adult subjectivity. Despite my efforts to maintain an objective stance, my interpretation of each poet’s nonsense verse was filtered through my own set of personal experiences. Accordingly, my response to the poems may differ from that of other readers. One of the objectives of this thesis, however, was to point out the way nonsense invites multiple interpretations. For this reason, I made sure to acknowledge the endless meanings that do exist, including those that lie outside of my own perspective.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

My analysis of these poets’ foreignizing nonsense verse has considered the way it assumes a knowledgeable implied reader, one who is willing to critically engage with the text. I have identified how Seuss, Silverstein, Lee, and Lawson disrupt the colonizing agenda of children’s literature by exposing the hidden adult. In recognizing the way nonsense encourages
children to question the ‘sense’ by which they interpret the world I have observed that these poets’ nonsense verse invites critical readings. However, just because nonsense presents this invitation, does not mean that children have to accept it.

Indeed, the educational implications of my analysis can only be explored through child-based research. In other words, we need the responses of actual children. Understanding how nonsense may or may not be beneficial to the development of children’s critical literacy skills requires that we develop a methodology that captures their engagement with it. Future research, therefore, could take the insights of this thesis further by designing a study that accounts for children’s responses to nonsense verse, as well as other forms of nonsense (e.g. street verse, illustration, YouTube videos, Internet memes etc.). To be sure, examining children’s engagement with different modes of nonsense (digital and non-digital) might offer important insight into the ways they are navigating the various knowledge networks of the Information Age. By observing children interact with nonsense we can gain a better understanding of whether or not they are inclined to accept, or reject, the critical reading position offered by it. Doing so will allow us to confront current assumptions about nonsense literature and children’s nonsensical play in the 21st century. After all, who knows? As the nonsense verse of Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, Dennis Lee, and JonArno Lawson suggests, a little nonsense can go a long way. A spoonful of silly just might help the critical literacy go up.
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