


HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY JUNIOR LITERATURE

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The Kettle and Spoon with all
their parts and their uses.

THE KETTLE AND SPOON
WITH ALL THEIR PARTS
AND THEIR USES.

By the Rev. J. H. ...

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The development of the human mind

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Chapter Three

'New Wave Nonsense' and the Tradition of Classic Nonsense

Introduction

In this chapter, I suggest that contemporary combinations of high and low forms and properties of humor have compounded with facets of classic nineteenth-century nonsense for children, along with elements of the surreal and the absurd. This development leads to the production of texts, both prose and verse, which suggest evidence of societal and authorial faith in young children's abilities, not only due to the presence of satire¹ but because of the frequent existence of the 'funny' and the 'serious' at the *same* time, in the *same* humorous stimuli (be that a character, description, situation or utterance). This new development within the nonsense genre—which I refer to as 'new wave nonsense', following Reynolds (2007)—reveals further acceptance of the ideals of the emergent paradigm; indeed, it is a 'child centric' genre, replete with what Hollindale (1997) calls 'childness'². However, this contemporary sub-genre of nonsense also reflects the complexities and paradoxes inherent in contemporary society's multiple, competing perceptions of childhood as it combines high, cognitive forms of humor, such as satire and irony, with lower humorous properties, such as comically exaggerated characters, violent slapstick, the comic grotesque and scatological humor.

My arguments require the charting of the long history of the combination of high and low forms of humor within individual texts, including both fiction and poetry, illuminating the traditional 'cross-over'³ appeal of nonsense, with its attractions for both adults and children. This broadly chronological approach is necessary as the link with classic nonsense from the nineteenth-century is stronger in texts from earlier in my period, in the 1960s, and I examine prose and verse together due to the inescapable linkage of the two in

discussions of nonsense literature, especially as regards children's literature (see, for example, Dusinberre, 1987; Anderson and Apseloff, 1989; Reynolds, 2007). The diachronic developments also allow me to identify and put into context the second type of 'subversive/transgressive' humor—the 'threat of the strange'—which I see emerging in junior texts from the late 1960s. The resurgence of nonsense, surreal and absurd texts, specifically for young readers, may, I suggest, include a threat, perceived by adult caretakers, of newness, strangeness and disturbance of prevailing notions of that which is suitable for young children. I then continue the historical evolution of nonsense into new wave nonsense, along with the transmutations of this second type into my third type of 'subversive/transgressive' humor—the 'comic grotesque'—which began with the humor of comic bodily realism in the late 1980s but which now, in contemporary texts, often extends to outright scatology.

The discussion of diachronic developments within the nonsense genre incorporates my suggestion that many texts have become more 'child centric' since the 1960s, but this does not necessarily mean that they are more 'childish', as the notion of childhood itself has altered considerably during this time. Humorous forms that once remained in the adult domain, such as satire and black humor, are now present in texts specifically aimed at a young children's market. This implies that children are now seen by society as being able to cope with, understand, and even enjoy such 'adult' concepts.

Definition of Terms

Before detailed textual examination of texts which support my arguments, a substantial definition and explanation of terms is necessary, due to the particularly complex nature of nonsense and its associated genres.

'Classic Nonsense' and 'New Wave Nonsense'

The term 'nonsense' is most frequently associated with classic nineteenth-century texts such as Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), and Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1846), *Nonsense Songs* (1871) and *Laughable Lyrics* (1877). However, there are twentieth-century junior texts that feature humor very similar to these nineteenth-century classics, such as Michael Rosen's *You're Thinking About Doughnuts* (1987), with its proliferation of satire and wordplay, which is a form of contemporary nonsense but in the classic vein. 'New wave nonsense', however, constitutes another variant of contemporary nonsense; the most recent incarnation. There are many connections to older forms of classic nonsense, which will be pointed out in the course of this chapter, but also important differences. This is most obvious in the 'child-centric' nature of the texts and in the inclusion of comic grotesque and scatological humor.

By classic nonsense, I mean works typical of Carroll and Lear, which Heyman refers to as "the pinnacle of nonsense" (2003: 13). Reynolds (2007: 46) suggests that this kind of nineteenth-century nonsense has aesthetic qualities and complexity, dealing with philosophical and/or political issues in an apparently simple way. Classic nonsense typically features higher, cognitive, and sophisticated forms of humor such as satire, irony, and parody. Another key facet of this nineteenth-century variant of nonsense is the abiding preoccupation with language, which serves not only as a technical device (such as multitudinous forms of wordplay), but also as the predominant subject matter of the nonsense. As Sewell (1952) writes about Carroll, his works are, "not merely in words, they are very frequently about words" (in Nel, 2004: 23), as Carroll sees language as a complex game, with rules to be bent and meanings that shift according to context. In addition, classic nonsense verse often privileges form with less regard to content, offering delight in the sounds and rhythms of language for its own sake. Classic nonsense verse relies heavily on regular, predictable meter and rhythm—poetic conventions that impose order among apparent 'disorder'—and there is often an excess of poetic devices such as rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. These devices are often evident in Silverstein's poems, which Anderson and Apseloff state are "solidly in the nonsense tradition", as is evident in 'Poemsicle', in which Silverstein questions the power of the suffix "-sicle":

If you add sicle to your pop,
Would he become a Popsicle?
Would a mop become a mopsicle?
Heysicle, I can't stopsicle.
Ohsicle mysicle willsicle Isicle
Havesicle tosicle talksicle
Likesicle thissicle foreversicle?

(*Light in the Attic*, 1981: 133)

Such poetic devices serve to add to the child appeal of nonsense, as does its predilection for slapstick humor; a common property of humor in nonsense texts, which can be seen, in classic nonsense, in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and in new wave nonsense texts such as Killeen's *My Sister's A Burp* (1999).

An essential element of my arguments in this chapter revolves around hierarchies of humor which are generally viewed as binary oppositions—the high and the low, the sophisticated or the base, the adult and the childish, the serious and the frivolous, the aesthetic/literary and the popular/oral—dichotomies that are over-simplistic, but germane to my central thesis and particularly relevant to the nonsense genre. Lecercle neatly sums up common critical assumptions about nonsense literature:

Nonsense as a genre is the weaving together, into a tradition, of two different, even opposed, threads, one literary, the other folkloric, one poetic, the other childish, one 'high', the other 'low'. The opposed threads produce naturally dialogic, or contradictory texts.

(1994: 179–180)

As a result of this contradictory, dichotomous nature, classic nonsense is frequently funny and serious at the same time, as Blake (1994) points out in the introduction to his selection of nonsense verse. Indeed, Lewis Carroll, in "An Easter Greeting to Every Child Who Loves *Alice*", which follows *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1994: 150), writes about those who, "may blame me for thus mixing together things grave and gay", and Spacks mentions Carroll's "special genius", which is "to disguise charmingly the seriousness of his concern" [that human communication is not necessarily logical and accurate] (1961: 275). This mixture of things "grave and gay"—the serious and the funny, and at the *same time*—is particularly important to this chapter and will be a key element in later discussions about the acceptance of the emergent paradigm.

The mixture of things 'grave and gay' neatly introduces the cross-over nature of much literary nonsense of various types as, particularly regarding nonsense poetry, some adult critics tend to respond to the seriousness of nonsense. A comment by Myers, regarding Shel Silverstein's work, is indicative of this critical tendency to align the 'serious' with the adult. Myers (2004) states that Silverstein's verse is "filled with irreverent humor", while also containing "a wealth of insight into human nature", so that it "speaks strongly to adults as well as kids". My extensive research into nonsensical texts, both old and new, suggests that one of the most prevalent and key forms of high, cognitive humor present in many texts is satire, which I suggest consists of different levels of subtlety, performing in specific ways within classic nonsense and new wave nonsense texts. Satire, with its extensive employment of irony and notions of attack, is a sophisticated literary form, and is generally assumed to have 'serious' intent, and so may be perceived as 'adult', thus it is useful to focus on that one humorous, yet also serious, form, to illustrate the changes within its use which back up my arguments.

New wave nonsense texts, like many examples of classic nonsense, may include many elements of the surreal and the absurd (terms which will be defined shortly) but, according to Reynolds (2007), they adhere especially to the modernist concern with abstraction, form and play which is frequently highlighted by theorists such as Dusi (1987) and Warner (2005). This modernist preoccupation manifests itself in the continued utilization of wordplay, such as split and double meanings, and the creation of neologisms and portmanteau words (which are a conflation of two words and meanings packed into one). These contemporary nonsense texts also include humorous absurdities, strange contrasts, juxtapositions and preposterous

situations; all of which may result in the expansion of imagination and creativity due to reader shifts in perception. These cognitive shifts, caused by the playful rearrangement of the familiar, can serve to make readers more aware of the everyday world that is generally unthinkingly accepted. Unlike classic nonsense, new wave nonsense texts contain the low humorous properties of violent slapstick *combined* with the comic grotesque and scatological humor (extreme forms of low forms of humor), which I suggest are akin to Gutwirth's "comedy of outrageousness" (1993) and the shock value of the taboo. However, despite the inclusion of extreme, low forms of humor, new wave nonsense texts frequently contain the 'darker' elements of philosophical, existential, even political issues, which they usually address playfully, thus creating complex multiple levels of reference for which classic nonsense is well known.

'Incongruity', the 'Surreal' and the 'Absurd'

Central to discussion in this chapter, 'nonsense', the 'surreal' and the 'absurd' are not synonymous literary forms, yet they have increasingly come together to form complex compounds in children's literature in the twentieth century and beyond. The forms and properties of humor have compounded due to developments within modernist and avant-garde groups in the arts which, according to Hopkins (2004), have gradually filtered into mainstream cultural productions, seen, for example, in the proliferation of posters and advertisements featuring the work of surrealist artists such as Dalí.

There are problems in differentiating the terms 'nonsense', the 'surreal' and the 'absurd' as all three can encompass the disruption of that usually anticipated. This disruption may pertain to the expected relation between a word (sign) and that signified (the real-life referent) or to unusual, even seemingly irrational and/or ludicrous situations and characters. However, all three terms encompass forms of incongruity humor, a humor theory not yet discussed in detail in this work, but which is essential in discussions of the 'strangeness', 'oddness', and contradictory nature of the nonsensical, which is reliant on cognition. Morreall, although talking generally about adult humor, posits that the main component of incongruity humor is "the conceptual; the cognitive" (1987: 203) although, as always with humor, especially as it relates to developmental issues and junior readers, the psychological and emotional aspects of nonsense cannot be ignored. Indeed, psychological and emotional issues are the main focus for some theorists who discuss nonsense literature for children, such as Tucker (1982) and Anderson and Apseloff (1989). Incongruity humor extends to wordplay (double meanings, jokes, puns) and phonological experimentation, for which nonsense is famed and has already been extensively discussed in great detail by others⁵, but what is essential to incongruity is the disjunction between expectation and reality.

Another essential point about incongruity forms of humor, highlighted by Morreall, is that the incongruous, as well as triggering "pleasant, amusing incongruity", can also trigger "negative emotion", such as fear and anger, or it may cause disorientation and puzzlement at the strange (1987: 6). What is necessary for all the types of incongruity humor discussed here is a 'playfulness', which Rothbart (1976) considers essential for the unresolved incongruities typical of nonsense, so that 'strangeness' is less likely to be perceived in a negative light. It is this joking, humorous, playful context of the incongruity and oddness that I hope to convey in my discussion of new wave nonsense texts in particular.

The perception of incongruity may be especially important as regards nonsensical literature for children in the junior age group, according to developmental arguments. Although Shultz's study (1976) suggests that children can start to appreciate pure incongruity, without having to resolve it, as young as eighteen-months-old, according to McGhee (1972), it is only at about seven or eight-years-old—the beginning of Piaget's stage of 'concrete operational thinking' and the age at which children might begin to read junior fiction—that children can become truly aware of 'logical inconsistencies' and humor expectancy violation. In effect, only then are children capable of experiencing the different levels of humor which are often present in the nonsensical, due to their "newly acquired cognitive capacities" (1972: 67). However, one of the joys of nonsensical texts is that often the incongruity does not have to be fully resolved and, in fact, numerous theorists suggest that it is often the unresolvable aspects which are the most attractive (Shultz, 1976; Rothbart, 1976; Morreall, 1987; Martin, 1987). Lippitt (1994) points out how the resolution of incongruity, and subsequent reader satisfaction at his/her cognitive mastery, does not fully explain the attractions of nonsense, and so the psychological freedom from the usual struggle for comprehension can, then, be a major factor in the seemingly perennial popularity of nonsensical literature, old and new, for both child and adult readers.

In the following definition of the 'surreal', I do not seek to define surreal literature *per se*, but elements I perceive as surreal within nonsense literature. The surreal is often a component of new wave nonsense texts, now marketed specifically for the young children's market. Cunningham (2001)⁶ describes the surreal in literature (and in art) as attempting to express the workings of the subconscious, and it is characterised by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtapositions of subject matter. I posit that, in addition, the surreal is often perceived as strange and even bizarre, and frequently involves the unexpected, surprise, and innovation. Within literature, the surreal can include contradictory statements, odd images, non sequiturs (statements that do not logically follow from the previous utterance), and stripping ordinary objects of their normal significance, forcing readers to consider the everyday in a new way. Bisset's *This is Ridiculous* (1977) features the unexpected situation in which a boy takes his goldfish for a swim in Hampstead pond, and the fish has a string tied to its tail so it does not become lost. The figure of Pepper, the talking horse, is then juxtaposed onto this surreal scene, and the odd situation

intensifies, as the horse accidentally consumes the fish while drinking from the pond. The surreal scene becomes even stranger, when the fish pops out of the horse's mouth and proceeds to tell the other fish how important he is. The surprise of the anthropomorphized fish and its odd, inappropriate statement, add to the strange, surreal nature of the scene.

This sort of humor fits my definition of the second type of 'subversive/transgressive' humour, 'the threat of the strange', which may accompany surreal situations and images. The emergence of Surrealism—a movement, founded in Paris by André Breton in 1924, which was at its height between the First and Second World Wars—may have aided the more general use of the term 'surreal' in society at large, and its shocking connotations. The Surrealists attacked rationalism, reason, and logic and sought to release the unconscious mind and irrational thinking, but their desire to stimulate thought and encourage creative thinking by the use of the surreal, which broke previously accepted 'rules', came to be associated with radical political and social change, even anarchism. As the Surrealist poet, Rimbaud, states, the Surrealist goal was nothing less than to "change life" (in Hopkins, 2004: 3). I suggest that the disturbing nature of the surreal, at least for adult caretakers, may be intensified by this association with radicalism and the perceived threat to the status quo.

Although the term 'absurd' is often subsumed into the category of the 'surreal', I suggest it involves the idea of being foolish or unwise, even silly and lacking in good sense, and it is also linked with the preposterous, the incongruous, and the illogical. Perceptions of the 'absurd' may have been popularized due to the advent of the Theater of the Absurd; the epitome of avant-garde theater. In the Theater of the Absurd, European dramatists, in the 1950s and 1960s, challenged traditional stage techniques, and created plots which no longer relied upon logical narrative development, incorporating dialogue which was often disjointed, repetitive, and seemingly incomprehensible to some audiences and critics. The absurd, as seen in the works of Albert Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, and Albee, is utilized to emphasize how modern life is farcically empty and meaningless, so attempts to impose structure and order will always be defeated and are therefore pointless. This existentialist angst, even nihilism, can be perceived as a threat to the status quo and 'normality', and although the implication of 'threat' and disturbance of the status quo may not be immediately evident in children's literature featuring the absurd, the absurd elements generally convey a meaningful message, which is often *comic* and *serious* at the same time. Anderson and Apseoff, discussing adult nonsense and the Theater of the Absurd, term this "sensible nonsense" (1989: 24), and it is evident in my next example of the absurd in junior fiction.

Incongruity that disturbs wider conventions of appropriateness, coupled with a contrary view of the world, can also indicate the 'absurd' within children's literature, as displayed repeatedly in Pat Hutchins' *The House That Sailed Away* (1975), particularly through the ludicrous behavior of the mother. The text features the surreal (a bizarre juxtaposition), as the

family's house and its entire contents have inexplicably floated away into the ocean. Most of the family are concerned when they spot a band of fierce pirates sailing towards them. Father is perturbed and Mother, too, says she hopes the pirates are not planning a visit. However, it is revealed that Mother's concern has nothing to do with the ferocious intent of the pirates, but, ridiculously, she is anxious, "because there seems to be an awful lot of them and I don't think we have enough teacups to go round" (29). The absurdity here, as well as being humorous because of the unexpectedness of the utterance and its defiance of common sense, also serves to illustrate, on a more serious note, Mother's pretensions of middle-class gentility and adherence to her own view of normality, no matter what chaos ensues around her, and so this example reveals the typical mix of the comic and the serious in Mother's absurd concern.

The incongruity and disturbance to prevailing modes of thought that may be engendered by the use of the 'surreal', the 'absurd' and/or other elements of classic nonsense may contribute to the potential 'subversiveness/transgression' humor of junior fiction. This type of humor—the 'threat of the strange'—can, I suggest, be equated with societal fear of Lyotard's "monster child" that Reynolds points out (2007: 3); a figure who is associated with creativity and the potential for change. The 'threat of the strange' in nonsensical literature, then, is not so much a threat perceived by the implied child reader himself/herself, but by the adult gatekeepers who surround him. Lyotard says:

The monster child is not the father of the man; it is what, in the midst of man, throws him off course [son dé-cours]; it is the possibility or risk of being set adrift.

(Lyotard, 1992: 116)

Hence this strangeness, which may result in a questioning of values by the implied child reader, can, at least theoretically, be disruptive to the status quo. Satire, which can include elements of the absurd and the surreal, is the main focus of the first part of this chapter, and could be viewed as threatening because of its critical force. However, I will suggest that the balance of types of humor in texts which feature satire has altered, from the 1970s, as nonsense has become more child-centered. I will suggest that the satirical humor in classic nonsense is actually more adult-orientated, with child readers as a secondary consideration in its 'double address', even if authors profess the texts were written for children. New wave nonsense texts, even if they are considered 'dual address', are much more child-centric, with adult co-readers as secondary, yet the implied child readers are presumed to comprehend satire, irony and parody, which are also included alongside the shock tactics and child appeal of low properties of humor, such as the comic grotesque and the scatological. This represents a contemporary

sense of the status of children, in that such texts do reveal faith in young children's competencies.

Nonsense and Satire

Close study of how satire—a predominant and key higher, cognitive, sophisticated humorous form within nonsensical fiction—has been, and is used, along with other accompanying, usually lower, forms and properties of humor, can reveal much about the changing, and often ambivalent, societal and authorial perceptions of children and their natures and abilities. In this first section, I suggest evidence for the longevity and continued use of satire, along with other forms and properties of humor, such as violent slapstick, within humorous nonsensical fiction, both old and new.

Satire and Low Forms of Humor

It certainly seems that satire within classic nonsense has been present with low forms of humor. For instance, in texts from the high point of the classic nonsense of Carroll and Lear in the 1860s and 1870s, there is much low humor, such as slapstick and farce, mixed with the surreal, the absurd, and the higher humor of advanced wordplay and the logic of argument. The ridiculous figure of the Red Knight, falling off his horse constantly in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), is typical. In early twentieth-century versions of classic nonsense texts, cartoon-like, violent slapstick features prominently, as in Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, with the characters' tendencies for "clip clap clouting" and "flip flap flouting" (1918: 78). Moving to the twenty-first century, in new wave nonsense, there are the classic, repeated 'pie flinging' attacks upon the general's face in Blake's *Stinky Finger's House of Fun* (2005), suggesting there is still much usage of slapstick humor. Such low forms of humor in nonsensical texts may often be classed as childish, but may have appeal for adults, as Freud (1960) suggests that adults can take pleasure in nonsense as it allows an adult to take leave of the rules of logic and the constraints of rationality that usually influence his/her thought. In addition, Lippitt suggests that "the spirit of playfulness", retained in adults, can explain their enjoyment of absurd and nonsense humor, as well as wordplay (1985: 58).

According to Ross (1998), satire is commonly acknowledged as a "critical force" and Martin suggests it "aims to discredit vices and follies" (in Morreall, 1987: 173), and so it might be considered an 'adult' concept. Through examination of the various ways in which satire is used in nonsensical fiction, the other forms and properties of humor it is combined with and its prominence among other forms and properties of humor, changing societal and authorial perceptions of childhood become evident. The increasing inclusion of a more subtle

satire within new wave nonsense texts specifically marketed for junior readers since 1960 supports my claims that the gradual embracing of the emergent paradigm is particularly evident in the sub-genre of contemporary nonsense. However, there is also evidence of confusion and ambivalence, which may reflect protectionist ideas about children and what they should, and should not be, exposed to in their literature, as adults seek to protect 'innocent' children from what they consider 'undesirable' aspects of the adult world.

Satire often performs in a specific way in nonsense texts. Although the invective of satire can often render it more serious than funny, in nonsensical forms of literature, humor seems to be a necessary component, although the nonsense aspects, and the humor generated, often act as a veil or mask, saying what might be rejected or censored by society if it was expressed in any other way. In order to illustrate the continued use of satire within humorous nonsense, I focus upon the subject of the law, trials and the police who help enforce this law—the "prevailing voices" of society that Wagg believes are often the subject of satire (1992: 255)—as this is a long-established, prominent subject for satirical treatment in many nonsensical texts. Indeed, as Reynolds points out, there is a long tradition, dating from the seventeenth century, of nonsense (performed at the Inns of Court) that derives from "parodies of the kinds of rhetorical and courtly skills on which the legal profession depend and in which its practitioners needed to excel" (2007: 17). It certainly seems the case that ridiculous, often caricatured, judges, lawyers, and policemen who are themselves nonsensical, or who spout nonsense, are a substantial source of amusement in both classic and new wave nonsense.

Satire, Judicial Authority and Carroll's Alice

Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) may well be the urtext for such satire within nonsensical children's literature, although the *Alice* books are perhaps more widely recognized for the concern with logic and problem-solving and their classic nonsense wordplay, being dominated, as they are, according to Spacks (1961), by a preoccupation with language. Lecerle highlights the nonsense generated by "verbal exchanges at trials" (1994: 71) and often, the staging of speech acts in general. Anderson and Apseloff agree that "fallacious arguments or logically valid arguments that nevertheless contradict common sense" (1989: 79–80) and show the distorted logic of authority figures is common in classic nonsense literature, and the famous trial scene in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) between the King, Alice, and the Knave of Hearts bears this out. The verbal battle in the judicial debate is acknowledged by Lecerle as part of a satirical critique of a corrupt judicial system as, for example, the King, who is also the judge, makes up rules and laws on the spur of the moment. For instance, he seems to invent "Rule Forty-two", in which "All persons more than a mile high" (1865: 140–141) are to leave the court, thus excluding the giant Alice, whose logical arguments have caused him problems.

Some explanation about the nature of the appeal of this satire ranged against those in positions of authority is necessary. The nonsense dialogues, typical of those in *Alice*, are located at sentential level and beyond; they are not at word level. They create puzzlement, even confusion, but not through the coinage of neologisms which may problematize relationships between signifier (the sequence of phonemes and graphemes in a word) and signified (the image of an object), but through dialogue which utilizes recognizable language that makes syntactical sense, but which does not make sense logically. These conversations do not utilize a 'smashing' of language, such as that considered necessary by the German nonsense poet, Morgenstern (1871–1914), if we are to free ourselves from the 'imprisonment' by language which he believes causes unsatisfactory relationships (in Ross, 1998). Nor is this nonsense akin to Rabelais' comic form of speech, *coq-a-l'âne* (which translates, literally, as 'from rooster to ass'), which, according to Thompson (1982), is a form of completely liberated speech comprised of "intentionally absurd verbal combinations" (in Ross, 1998: 27). In the nonsense conversations of trial scenes, there is no such total abandonment of the complex web of conventions that construct meaning. The nonsensical aspect of dialogue in such scenes mostly emanates from the incongruity of antagonism, impoliteness, even the verbal violence that Lecercle mentions, which violate Grice's cooperative conversational maxims of an 'ideal' conversation (1989), Habermas' theory of communicative action (1979 and 1984), and Leech's Politeness Principle (1983)⁹. The language is recognizable and the nonsense is conceptual. The rigid conformity to the logical demands of language in these scenes suggests a sense of insanity in the world at large, and this is a main source of the satire contained within Carroll's texts, revealing how language can be manipulated by those in positions of power and authority, to detrimental effect.

It may seem that humor derived from such satire might have more appeal to adults, despite Carroll's constant direct address to an implied child reader. This kind of direct address can be viewed as patronizing, as seen when the narrator uses the word 'suppressed' during the trial scene, and explains the actions step by step; "As that is rather a hard word", so I will "just explain to you [the implied child reader] how it's done" (1865/1994: 135). Certainly, as this form of nonsense is at sentential and conceptual level, it may not have the appeal of nonsense for children that many commentators highlight. Children do indeed seem to relish nonsensical wordplay, and especially the sounds and rhythms of nonsense. Many critics, such as Sewell (1980), Tucker (1982), and Anderson and Apseloff (1989), cite the perennial attractions of tongue twisters, nonsense alphabets, and children's enjoyment of humorous neologisms, while the enjoyment and benefits of children listening to, and creating their own nonsense, are well known. However, the humor generated by the nonsense at the Knave of Heart's trial is, I believe, part of what Lypp (1995) describes as the rise of satire in the nineteenth century. Although available to children, who Lypp says were beginning to participate in general humorous culture, especially in political satire, this humor was certainly not specifically childish. Reynolds also points

out how the pleasure of some kinds of nonsense derives from knowledge which is only available to an educated elite and is, as such, "a self-conscious insider humor" (2007: 46), which is likely to be more adult-orientated. However, as always with considerations of humor, the psychological benefits of this form of satirical nonsense cannot be ignored. As Lecerclé points out, many readers, whether adult or child, may actually enjoy the flouting of conventions of conversational politeness that are usually observed, as the characters, "dare what we do not dare to do, and give us the vicarious thrill that fantasy is supposed to provide" (1994: 106). Despite this potentially beneficial psychological benefit of nonsense available to all, I still posit that the humor derived from satire ranged against judicial authority is most likely to be aimed at, and appeal to, an adult readership.

Satire, Judicial Authority, and Twentieth-Century Literary Nonsense

Satire trained upon the law and authority figures is also present in humorous nonsense in the early twentieth century. Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* (1918), an Australian text, pokes fun at Bunyip Bluegum's Uncle Wattleberry, a "wowser", who is a prim, pompous, and humorless person in authority, as seen, for example, in the farcical scene when Bill Barnacle pulls at Uncle Wattleberry's prized whiskers, believing him to be a disguised "puddin' thief" (90). There is also much fun at the expense of the Mayor and the Constable, who appears obsessed with eating bananas at inopportune moments. For instance, the surreal magic pudding shows a lack of reverence for their authority with his typical sharp, but humorous, insults, made directly to them—he says, "As for the Mayor, he's a sausage-shaped porous plaster" (138). Hence, these ridiculous caricatures do not inspire the usual reverence and deference that might be expected, given their high social rank. A mixture of the nonsensical, the satirical, and the surreal is seen later in the century, in the American Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961), when Officer Shrift turns into a policeman, a judge, and a jailor at his own whim, possibly hinting at the corruption of the law and its all-encompassing power. It is also particularly evident in David Henry Wilson's homage to Carroll's *Alice; The Castle of Inside Out* (1997), which is full of complex wordplay and includes much satire about bureaucracy, petty rules, and the legal system.

Although, as already argued, satirical humor within nonsense is cognitive and advanced and may, therefore, seem to appeal more to certain adults, such humor can also produce one of the acknowledged pleasures of satire for children that Griffin points out (1994 in Stallcup, 2004). This is the fun and ridicule to be had at the expense of the adult, authority figure, who may be bigger and stronger than the child. Paradoxically, the use of caricatures who look ridiculous or act in a ludicrous manner, common in nonsense, also offers some evidence *against* the many arguments for the primacy and all-encompassing nature of incongruity forms of humor, which are argued to constitute the majority of humor within nonsensical literature. As Scruton (1992)

suggests, it may be an incongruity that is noticed, but that incongruity actually "illustrates a deeper congruity" between the caricature and the real-life referent (in Lippitt 1994: 150). As Scruton (1987) puts it, readers may actually be amused by the 'fit' and the congruity of the caricature, not the lack of fit which would be expected by the incongruous.

Trial and court scenes still feature in examples of contemporary nonsense that are largely satirical in intent; texts that I do not class as new wave nonsense, primarily as they do not contain comic grotesque/scatological humor. Michael Rosen's *You're Thinking About Tomatoes* (2005), the sequel to *You're Thinking About Doughnuts* (1987) is, like its forerunner, an extended social comment about the British colonial past. The text features a trial scene which is surreal. The court is populated, for instance, by speaking treasures from India, animated corn dolls, and a large, black, talking dog who acts as Clerk of the Court. The judge, Justice Chiltern, performs multiple tasks, revealing his far-reaching power and corrupt nature. The judge also seems, bizarrely, to be identical to Frank's horrible, bullying teacher, Mr. Butcher, while also being indistinguishable from the all-conquering Lord Chiltern, the grave robber and slave master, who has 'collected' treasures from other cultures, and who is the obvious target of the narrator/author. Judge Chiltern, in true nonsense fashion, is made to appear ridiculous, not least by his physical appearance. Readers are told how, "Mr. Butcher-in-armour clanked in, with his helmet on and a judge's wig stuck on top" (2005: 136), and this also emphasizes his multiple roles. The use of irony, which Simpson (2003) argues often accompanies satire (and nonsense), is also visible here. The judge, in his various guises, has already been established as the 'baddy' of the piece, and, for readers familiar with the preceding book, this impression will be even further emphasized. The trial's purpose is to convict the book's well-meaning protagonist, Frank, and his companions (two of whom have themselves been 'stolen' from other cultures), as, "villains who were prepared to wreck the wonderful Chiltern House collection for their own greedy ends" (2005: 138). Young readers are likely to be able to access the irony of his statement, as it is the greed and wrong-doing of the judge (and his multiple personas) which the narrator/author highlights extensively throughout the texts.

So, although satire features heavily in classic nonsense texts, such as Carroll's *Alice*, ostensibly written for children but which have extensive appeal for adults, it is also, along with its associated form, irony, present in many contemporary nonsensical texts. However, the satire is often not employed in the same way in newer texts.

A Change in the Prominence and Overttness of Satire

Rosen's use of satire in *Tomatoes* aptly introduces a change that I detect within this broader continuity of satire within humorous nonsense. This is the move towards *less* prominence and overttness of the satire contained within

nonsensical fiction; a change which seems contrary to the wider social zeitgeist of the time. Although I have illustrated the use of nonsense and satire in texts from the nineteenth century onwards, I agree with Heyman that nonsense, after a period of relative unpopularity within children's literature in the first half of the twentieth century, started to come back into style *for children* in the 1960s and 1970s. Heyman argues that, as with Victorian nonsense, this was not an isolated literary trend but it arose in a time of rebellion, which included the rising counterculture, leading to the social and political unrest of the 1960s, at a time when "children's authors rebelled against imposed meaning, gender, and race stereotypes" (2003: 18). According to Tucker, at this time there was also a "decline of deference" and a "growth of satire in British culture" (in Reynolds and Tucker, 1998: 16) which helped erode the establishment values generally reflected in children's fiction. Wagg, too, cites extensive evidence of the culture of satire emerging from within the dominant social classes, which was then disseminated, via the mass media (by the "prestigious public institution", the BBC), into popular culture, in the form of programs such as *The Goon Show*, first broadcast in 1951; *Beyond the Fringe* (1960); *That Was the Week That Was* (1962–1963) and, in particular, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–1974). These broad social movements might indicate moves towards a more obvious inclusion of satire, but the evidence suggests that the opposite is true.

Satire as an 'Aside' to Lower Forms of Humor

Although these moves were afoot in society at large, paradoxically, many nonsensical texts written for children during this time, and onwards, tend to include the satirical almost as an aside to the humor of the surreal and absurd, and/or comic bodily realism. This reduction in the prominence and overtness of satire in nonsensical literature may be due to the fact that, from the 1960s and onwards, children were increasingly offered books that were written specifically for a child readership, due to the boom in publishing and the identifying of separate markets. The satire in these more contemporary humorous nonsensical texts can often seem an adjunct to other humorous forms and properties, such as the surreal or, in more recent texts, scatology. So satire does not take precedence and may, therefore, be unlikely to be a main component of a reader's "gestalt" (Iser's term, 1974, referring to individual meaning-making and gap-filling which "becomes experience for the reader"). This is unlike the satire within, for example, earlier anti-war/tyranny nonsensical texts; a satire which is often overt and can be seen in works such as André Maurois' *Fattypuffs and Thinifers* (first published in Britain from the original French in 1941), featuring two nations with different tastes who eventually unite and benefit.

For example, satirical comment is present, but is not all-pervasive, in Spike Milligan's *The Bald Twit Lion* (1968); a text full of jokes and puns, likely to be immediately comprehended by a young readership of the time, such as the

quip about the lion's tea being the "Lyons" brand (81), and the typical word-play and double meanings of nonsense. When the bald lion says, "I must find a solution", as in an answer to his hair loss problem, he then proceeds to squeeze every tube in the jungle to, literally, find a solution/substance to cure his baldness. The text is full of silly, often 'irrelevant' illustrations, such as the picture of a supposedly ill nonsense creature, the "Hippochondriac", who "was too ill to appear in the Bald Twit Lion story" (90), and it features nonsense neologisms, as seen in the phrase "krupled his blutzon" (86). However, the satirical comment typical of earlier nonsense is still present; in this case, attacking man's unnecessary, over-complicated organization, the killing of animals, and man's war-like tendencies. For instance, the narrator says, "One thing he [man] never forgot was how to have wars and say, 'Oh dear, how sad,' when children were killed by bombs" (79). These sort of comments, though, are few and isolated, and then the 'comic' resumes immediately—"But this story is a hap-hap-happy story, about animals"—and the narrator goes on to relate the tale of Mr. Gronk, the lion, in his village of Pongoland. The incongruity and juxtaposition of the 'serious' comments about men's failings and war and a "hap-hap-happy story about animals", even though the satirical comment is limited, does emphasize the mix of 'grave and gay' that Carroll mentions. Its presence in a book ostensibly written for a child audience is telling, in that it indicates that the broadly political can be included in a young children's book, though whether it is included for the benefit of adult co-readers or for child readers themselves (or indeed both) is debatable, especially given Milligan's history as an adult comic, performing as one of the 'Goons'¹⁰.

The Reduced Prominence of Satire

The reduction in the prominence of satire in children's nonsense may reflect some of the varied perceptions about children within society mentioned earlier. The fact that there is less obvious focus upon the satirical elements in texts may mean that the satire is, in effect, more subtle (even given the direct nature of Milligan's comment), being less likely to be the abiding memory a young reader takes away from the book, thus trusting children's abilities to 'get' it from among the other, often more obvious, humorous forms and properties within the text. This might imply adherence to beliefs that would eventually lead to the more positive ideologies of the emergent paradigm. However, the satirical element may appear reduced, and certainly less obvious, because, in a nonsense book now *specifically* marketed for children, it is less acceptable, even under the guise of a funny book. This might suggest adherence to the protectionist paradigm, lessening undesirable 'adult' themes in order to maintain the presumed 'innocence' of childhood for as long as possible. It is also possible that satire's continued presence, though somewhat hidden among many forms of low humor, is still there for the benefit of adults as co-readers.

I suggest that the reduction in the prominence and overtness of satirical comment in nonsensical literature for children (even if it is more directly stated) is part of a more positive dual address of readers, both children and adults, and this might at least partially explain the cross-over appeal of nonsense today. According to Cadden (2000), texts that address child and adult readers simultaneously are seen as more beneficial to, and respectful of, child readers, rather than the flawed 'double address' that Wall (1991) mentions, in which adults and children are alternatively addressed in the texts. This alternative addressing may be a result of an author's conflicting sense of audience; something that seems true of earlier classic nonsense. According to Nikolaeva (2002), in cases of such double address, the narrator assumes a superior position, often communicating with implied adult readers over the top of child readers' heads, and this often occurs in earlier nonsensical texts in my period, which more closely follow the adult-centered traditions of nineteenth-century, classic nonsense. For instance, in André Maurois' *Fattypuffs and Thinifers*, in addition to the humorous, child-friendly, apposite names of, for example, King Plumpapuff and the avuncular, conversational address typical of the period described in Chapter 1, evident in narrator comments such as "we really ought to see what was happening to Edmund" (23), there are satirical comments that I suggest are addressed to adult readers. When the warring comic opposites, the Fattypuffs and Thinifers, are trying to avoid all-out war, James tells Edmund how the two parties will try to agree—"That's what you call a conference". Edmund replies:

"We have conferences on the Surface," said Edmund. "We've had no end of conferences—in fact, so many that people stopped paying any attention to them."

"My father says that it's much better if people don't pay any attention to them," said James Vorapuff.

(2001/1941: 45–46)

Such comments are aimed over the heads of young implied readers and are addressed, instead, to an adult audience who may much more readily appreciate any satirical comment ranged against warring parties, especially during the Second World War when this text was written and published. In the dual address of more contemporary literary nonsense, written specifically (at least ostensibly) for a child or more child-like audience, there is a fusion of single and double address that results in both children and adults being addressed together. For example, in Milligan's *The Bald Twit Lion*, most of the so-called lower forms of humor, such as the jokes, puns, and humorous incongruity and extraneous information/detail, are likely to be understood and appreciated by readers of all abilities and experiences. But, as already shown, the satirical comment is not 'hidden' in this text, not needing to be accessed by a reader of greater knowledge, so, yet again, readers of all ages and experiences are likely

to be able to comprehend the potency of this anti-war message. This obviously increases the 'inclusive' nature of the humor, too.

The inclusion of satire within nonsense literature might suggest that these texts mirror contemporary society's gradual acceptance of the emergent paradigm of children's rights, abilities and participation. However, the combination of satire, along with prominent properties of low humor, may serve to reduce its effect, and so may reveal some retention of protectionist models of childhood within contemporary society. Although nonsense for junior readers may show some evidence of this beneficial dual address, and there is also often an acknowledgement (even if it is subconscious on the part of the author) that children should, and indeed, can be offered this type of humor, social comment, and/or seriousness, it does seem that any darkness or seriousness must be diffused by way of 'comic relief'; the humor of which may serve to attract young readers in the first place. However, it may also be the case that such humor serves to placate adult censors of a text, such as parents, teachers, and librarians, as the notion of any satirical attack or serious issues can seem diluted or even hidden by comic relief aspects.

The 'Comic' and the 'Serious' in One Literary Device

The move to comic relief represents another change in some contemporary nonsense texts for junior readers, which somewhat contradicts the notion of children as capable and resilient. Although there is a conflation of the serious and the comic in the text as a *whole*, these different states (the comic and the serious) are not generally contained within the one narrative device and/or portion of text, as in classic nonsense, but are present side by side, as if one needs the other to make it acceptable. The sophisticated combination of the comic and the serious in *one* device, in the form of the nonsense poem 'Jabberwocky', can be seen in Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Shires (1988) points out how, among the pleasure and amusement offered by the sounds, rhythm and sheer inventiveness of the language in the poem, the specter of death is never far away. In fact, the amusement and humor of the clever wordplay and neologisms in the poem provide an excess of signification, but without a context or clear meaning, for both character and reader, which, she says, may cause some darkness of thought. Before Humpty Dumpty later explains the poem to Alice, the main thing that she understands is that "*somebody killed something*" (1872: 30) and Shires suggests that, as 'Jabberwocky' provides no metaphoric frame in which to put the sequence of events, the reader may feel a sense of "death hanging in the air" (1988: 278), and this complex combination of different feelings is engendered in the one device; the nonsense poem that is 'Jabberwocky'.

In contrast, John Antrobus' *Help! I Am a Prisoner in a Toothpaste Factory* (1978) serves as an example of how 'seriousness' (of satirical comment, in this case) is often followed by comic relief in post-1960s nonsense texts, which may reveal an ambivalence regarding that which is deemed suitable for young

children. Antrobus' text contains the credentials for the nonsensical and the surreal in its bizarre plot, which includes a race of alien salesmen, toothpaste, chickens, a mad uncle, and an Indian yogi who floats about, apparently from nowhere, imparting advice. Much humor originates from the wit of the child character, Ronnie, and the text includes jokes from and about the highly eccentric Uncle Roger, such as when the characters are discussing divorce and he is asked, "Do you want your wife back?" and he answers, "I didn't like her back. I didn't like her front much either" (1978: 30). However, the text also features, among the humorous nonsense and as an essential part of the plot (not isolated comments, as in Milligan's text), satirical attacks upon big business, commercialization, and advertising in particular. Ronnie's mom, as well as many others, becomes a "Glum Mum", as she is taken over by an alien toothpaste which has been widely advertised on television, and readers are shown the misery of the production line, peopled by zombified Glums stolen from Earth. The seriousness of this text is lightened by a return to the comic; for instance, by the bizarre, funny antics of Ronnie's eccentric and crazy Uncle Roger, who often acts as 'comic relief' by, for example, nonsensically insisting on taking his beloved chickens on holiday with him. He is assisted in his comic relief/clown role by Ronnie's mad inventor father, and the text's happy resolution occurs when the chicken-loving Uncle Roger provokes farcical laughter among the characters (and possibly the readers) when he asks the aliens if he can visit his egg and write to it at Christmas. Ronnie's mom and dad laugh and this frees the humans from the mind control of the aliens. This text demonstrates the power of laughter and reveals how subject matter can actually be political and 'serious' as long as it is tempered by 'comic relief' and the manner, in the form of humorous nonsense, is playful. Clement Freud's *Grimble* (1968) also utilizes comic relief after the 'seriousness' of the child protagonist's shock at finding his parents have left to go to Peru without telling him, and Margaret Mahy's *The Very Wicked Headmistress* (1984) frequently counteracts serious comments with comic relief.

The use of characters who serve as comic relief is also common in contemporary nonsensical texts which feature more obvious, extensive, serious satirical comment, in the vein of classic nonsense, as seen in Rosen's texts about the injustice of British colonial acquisition. *You're Thinking About Doughnuts* (1987) and *You're Thinking About Tomatoes* (2005) are texts in which the satirical content is primary, and the comic is often used as relief from the seriousness, although I contend that these texts also serve as an example of works which echo the emergent paradigm by acknowledging an active, capable child reader by way of combining the 'serious' and the 'comic' in one device.

These texts are quite graphic in places and describe events which are far from funny. For example, *Tomatoes* features a description of the massacre of Indians at the storming of the Kashmir Gate in Delhi. Both texts are also surreal—for instance, *Tomatoes* features an ornamental lead dolphin which comes to life and speaks with a pronounced Yorkshire accent, and can fly from the roof—but in both texts, the seriousness of comment about the injustice of

slavery, the grave robbing of Pyramids, and the appropriation of the lands of other cultures is tempered by a 'clown' character who can appear merely silly and ridiculous. In *You're Thinking About Doughnuts*, comic relief is provided by a talking plastic skeleton, with its absurd conversations, akin to the nonsense logic conversations in Carroll's *Alice* books¹¹, and the extended joke of the skeleton's obsession with Frank thinking about doughnuts.

Comic relief is also contributed by the space suit which comes to life in the museum. This spacesuit is, ridiculously and rather ironically, afraid of heights, and it frequently breaks the spell of seriousness with its constant, often inappropriate, nonsense refrains. The spacesuit frequently mimics the astronaut, Neil Armstrong's, famous phrase from the first moon landing. For example, when the animated stuffed tiger is relating the sad tale of how it came to be shot and stuffed and kept as a rich man's trophy, thus endangering its species, the space suit, seemingly indifferent, says, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for popcorn" (1987: 39). However, this absurd phrase, in the manner of classic nonsense, which combines the comic and the serious in *one* device or utterance, may also serve to highlight the juxtaposition between the political and the serious, and the comically nonsensical. The surprise of the unexpected phrase may itself be enough to provoke laughter, due to a desire for psychological release or because of the extreme incongruity, but this 'nonsense' may also serve to make a reader aware of the possibility that not only the utterance, but indeed the act of shooting tigers (which prompted the outburst), is ridiculous and does not make sense. As Alberghene points out, unlike many adults, who may view a character or event as merely silly, children can often perceive the comic *and* the serious in the one character/event and this provides evidence, in the spirit of the emergent paradigm, that, "the child can entertain two opposing ideas at the same time" (1989: 242), which Alberghene suggests is one of the prerequisites for mature reading and mature thought.

The 'Threat of the Strange'

Precisely because of the satirical, critical comment within many nonsensical texts, it should be apparent that elements of 'nonsense', the surreal, and the absurd in children's literature can, at least theoretically, be viewed as radical, and therefore transgressive of society's norms, and this may be compounded by (adult) fear of the perceived threat of the 'strangeness' of the absurd and surreal. In his discussion of Ungerer's picture books such as *Zeralda's Ogre* (1967), which contain surreal and nonsensical images, as well as the comic grotesque, Siegel offers evidence of a librarian's wariness and states that Ungerer's books for children "make some adults uncomfortable" (1977: 26). I suggest that books, such as Ungerer's *I Am Papa Snap and These Are My Favorite No Such Stories* (1973), which features the opening page illustrated, complete with its absurdist notions, can be seen as radical because of the degree of cynicism and alienation suggested.

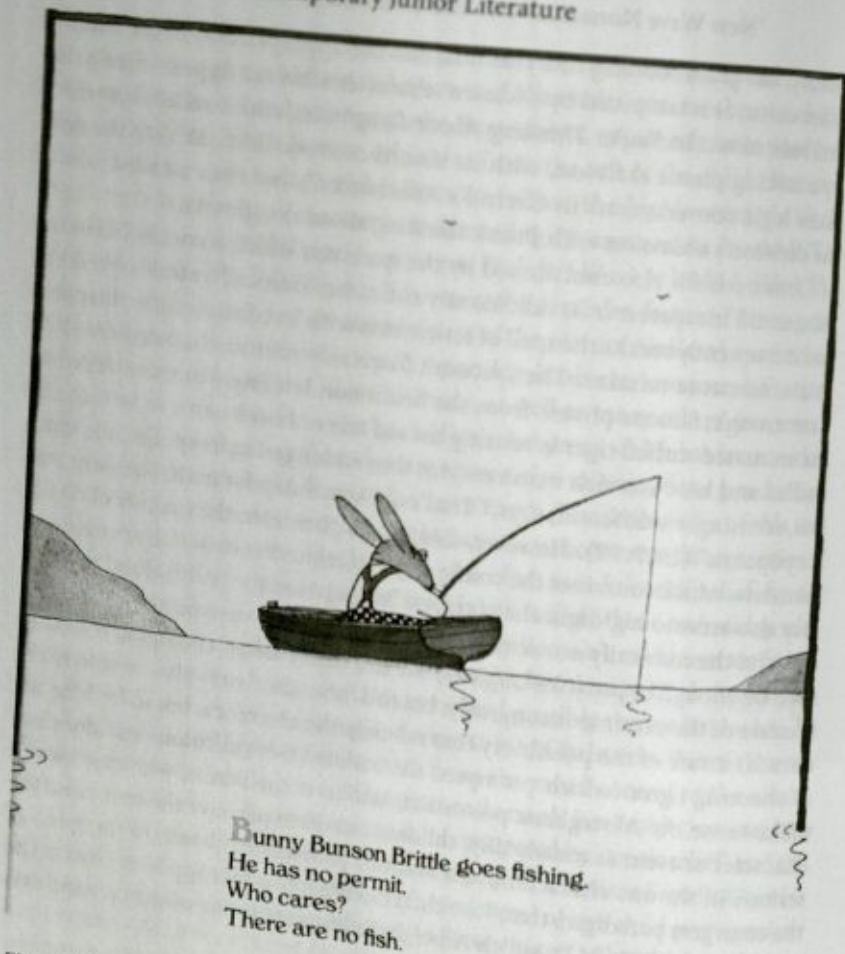


Figure 3.1 Illustration from the first page of Tomi Ungerer's *Papa Schnapp und seine noch nie dagewesenen Geschichten*, original title of the book *I am Papa Snap and These Are My Favorite No Such Stories* aus dem Englischen von Anna von Cramer-Klett (1973).

In books for youngsters, in which optimism and hope is so important (Reynolds, 2007: 89), this humor, which Seigel calls "satirical" and "astringent", can be perceived as threatening to social norms of what is acceptable or desirable for young children, and is therefore potentially radical.

Fears of apparent radicalism add to any transgression perceived by adult caretakers of my second stage of subversive/transgressive humour in literature for junior readers—the 'threat of the strange', as mentioned earlier. Heyman (2003) points out that, in the twentieth century, the 'strangeness' of nonsense became intensified and frequently incorporated the surreal and the absurd. This was partly due to the seriousness and even blackness that often suffused adult nonsense, such as that by authors like Mervyn Peake and Edward Gorey

in the early decades, which may have resulted from the deleterious effects of the First World War. I suggest that twentieth-century nonsensical literature for children also began to show such undertones of strangeness, in addition to the gradual incorporation of elements from Dadaism, Surrealism, and facets of the Theater of the Absurd. According to Reynolds, "one of the most important periods in the development of literary nonsense in children's literature occurred in the 1960s" (2007: 56). Reynolds' "new wave of nonsense" ties in with my dating of the beginning of considerable changes in the content, forms, and functions of humor in junior literature, given the later incorporation of one-time 'radical' notions into innately conservative junior fiction. This mixture of the surreal and absurd, in addition to satirical comment, could certainly be perceived as threatening, even anarchic, by some adults, as, for example, overblown caricatures from the 'serious' adult world are set up to ridicule and thus, as Anderson and Apseoff point out (1989), there is an implied criticism of the existing order.

However, as Barreca suggests, satire, despite any trafficking with subversion, actually works within the boundaries of established literary and social laws; it is, in effect, often part of "change-without-change" and is reactionary (1988: 11). Petzold (1992), too, believes satire reaffirms norms by making deviations from these norms appear ridiculous. Anderson and Apseoff, specifically discussing literary nonsense, state that the 'attack' elements of nonsense do not turn the actual world upside down or even set it right. Indeed, they call nonsense "a circular flight that returns us the ground" (1989: 5), and so the connections between nonsense and the carnivalesque, which functions as permitted licence, can be seen. The 'strangeness' of nonsense does not, then, constitute a genuine threat.

The Transmutation to the 'Comic Grotesque': New Wave Nonsense

The transmutation of the surreal and the absurd to incorporate the grotesque and comic bodily realism in humorous nonsensical literature for junior readers starts to become apparent in the 1970s—the later 1970s in particular—and this may be indicative of numerous differing, even contradictory, perceptions of children and childhood. For instance, the writing and publication of texts featuring bodily realism may be further evidence of the primacy of developmental thinking that Wood (2003) points out has dominated educational practice since the 1950s. It could also be suggestive of the continuation of less positive views within society, about children's uncivilized natures. As Cunningham points out, there is a common tendency "to imagine the history of humankind as equivalent to the life cycle of a human being", with a gradual ascent from savagery/childhood to civilization/adulthood (1995: 2). There is often an adult condemnation of literature that strays too far into the comic grotesque and/or scatological. For instance, Rees talks

of the 'tastelessness' of much of Dahl's oeuvre, and berates him as an author who, "plays too much to the gallery where children sit" (1988: 154), and these kinds of comments might indicate the continuation of views of the child as somehow 'other'—as savage and uncivilized—which also implies that childhood is a stage to be overcome.

The persistence of such negative views may add to the perceived threat to civilized (adult) society by the young, as noted by Buckingham (2000) and John (2003), although I suggest the 'threat' from such literature is more likely to be to parental hegemony than to any larger, societal status quo. The time frame for these changes, largely beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, is particularly illuminating, as these decades heralded the beginnings of what Buckingham calls the "empowerment of children, both politically and economically" (2000: 79), giving them status as citizens and consumers, in the spirit of the new emergent paradigm of childhood. The turn to comic bodily realism, and later, the scatological within new wave nonsense, can seem somewhat paradoxical, revealing the extent of confusion surrounding children in contemporary society. Children are simultaneously perceived as competent, active participants, well able to comprehend and enjoy higher forms of humor such as irony and satire, not needing to be protected from the darker, often more serious side of life, while also being viewed as somehow 'undeveloped', coarse, and slaves to their base instincts.

What follows is an essential chronological charting of the various developments within nonsense for junior-age children, dealing with verse and prose together, which gradually reveals my third type of subversive/transgressive humor. This type of humor incorporates some elements of the surreal and absurd into the 'comic grotesque' and scatological humor; moves that are undoubtedly an essential part of the development of child-centric, new wave nonsense. It also serves to reveal the problems of adherence to simplistic, opposing binaries of adult/child as regards humor in contemporary literature, and society in general, as well as highlighting continuing societal ambivalence concerning children, their natures and competencies.

The diachronic charting of the third stage of 'subversive/transgressive' humor can be seen in developments in nonsensical poetry first. Although, in Britain, James Reeves had published his children's nonsense verse collection *Prefabulous Animiles* in 1957, the surreal and absurd, aside from the nonsense staple of made-up creatures, are most evident in the works of poets, such as the Americans, Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, and Spike Milligan, who started writing nonsense verse in the late 1960s¹², and this nonsense perhaps best fits the second type of subversive/transgressive humor I identify—"the threat of the strange". Prelutsky and Silverstein's nonsense verse in the classic vein, published earlier in the 1970s, tends to hinge on impossible happenings and the bizarre, such as that seen in Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974), which Anderson and Apseloff point out features incongruous combinations of creatures and places (often through illustration), such as the

crocodile sitting in a dentist's chair, with the dentist crouching in its lower jaw while working. The surreal in nonsense verse starts to incorporate the grotesque and comic bodily realism in literature which features gross appetites, akin to those described by Bakhtin in discussions of 'grotesque realism' and the 'material bodily principle', which reveal a concern with the bodily functions of the human body, defecation and food and drink (*Rabelais and His World* 1984/1968). According to Stephens, literature featuring gross appetites may be particularly pertinent to children, given their common fixation with food, and this may manifest itself in their literature as "hyperbolic forms of gluttony" (1992: 122). This move to comic bodily realism in junior literature is first evident in American texts. Prelutsky's *The Queen of Eene* (1978) features ridiculous situations and incongruously odd characters, but poems such as 'Pumberly Pott's Unpredictable Niece', who eats her uncle's car piece by piece, reveal a preoccupation with unusual appetites, as does 'Gretchen in the Kitchen':

Then deep into my reeking vat
I toss a tongue of pickled rat,
Some salted spiders (half a pound),
Two candied eyeballs, sweet and round.
(1978: 30)

This compounding of grotesque realism and unusual appetites was not confined to verse, however. Louis Sachar's *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, originally published in 1978 but reissued in 2004¹³, reveals the move to surreal, comic bodily realism and gross appetites within nonsense fiction. The humorous text is certainly surreal and nonsensical, and in the introduction the narrator recalls how the stories have been called "strange and silly". The whole school has been built sideways, with a class being taught on the thirtieth floor, and the strangeness continues, as the teacher, Mrs. Gorf, turns her pupils into apples. 'Sammy', the smelly new pupil wrapped up in coats, is eventually revealed to be a rat, and children sample ice cream which tastes of other pupils, for example, the "Maurecia-flavoured ice cream" (2004: 47-50). The preoccupation with gross foodstuffs continues when the surreal moves towards the grotesque in the chapter concerning 'Leslie' (Chapter 18), who, ludicrously, does not know what to do with her toes. Louis, the yard teacher (a character who, in a typical 'nonsense' amalgamation of reality and fiction, is the real author, who did, in fact, work in such a role at a school) tells her, "Just cut them off and give them to me", and he continues, saying that Miss Mush, the lunch teacher, "can make little hot dogs out of them" (87-88). So this text reveals, yet again, how the surreal merges with comic bodily realism, at first, by way of gross appetites/food stuffs.

The move towards British-authored, child-centered nonsensical literature featuring the surreal, comic, bodily realism, the grotesque and, later, the

scatological, did not, and indeed probably could not, occur until after the emergence of the ground-breaking "urchin verse" (Townend's phrase, 1992); the wave of child-centered poetry in the 1970s, led primarily by Michael Rosen's *Mind Your Own Business* (1974). According to Styles (1998), this heralded a move from pastoral poetry, which was largely middle class and contained romantic notions of children and nature—such as that epitomized by R. L. Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885)—towards realism, with poetry reflecting the day-to-day existence of many different kinds of childhood, including the experiences of immigrants and the working class. I contend that this seminal "urchin verse" paved the way for realism of a different kind—of bodily realism and the scatological—in nonsensical poetry and fiction created by British authors for junior readers in the 1980s and beyond. Urchin verse for younger readers may have started to become humorous through the use of subversive verse, which Styles states is a staple of comic poetry of any age (1998: 109). Poets such as Colin McNaughton, a comic writer and illustrator of nonsense verse, whose poetry can be argued to be rude and subversive and might appeal to young readers, began to emerge. In *There's an awful lot of Weirdos in our Neighbourhood* (1987), McNaughton writes:

Our vicar is kind,
But eats more than he should.
I suppose we could call him,
'A fat lot of good.'

(1987: 66)

This potentially subversive verse for younger readers would progress further, to include the comic grotesque and even scatological humor, as will be revealed shortly.

Other trends within society may also have affected this change to realism, including gross bodily realism, within junior nonsense. During the 1970s, within adult comedy and television, the humor of the *Monty Python* team was popular⁴, and often dealt with what Gutwirth calls "the sacred and the unmentionable" (1993: 140)—religion and gross bodily functions and appetites—accompanied by Terry Gilliam's surreal animations. Carpenter states that *Monty Python* marked the move "away from the would-be satirical towards surrealism" (2000: 304), and this combination of the surreal and comic bodily realism, with less satirical intent, can be seen within junior fiction and poetry, although, typically, a few years later (although the hugely popular, and contentious, *Monty Python* films did continue until 1983⁵).

McGough, Comic Bodily Realism and the Surreal

The development from the surreal and the absurd in nonsensical literature, towards the surreal, comic bodily realism and the grotesque, is evident in the

work of Roger McGough; a poet whom, Morse (1992) believes, satisfies both adult and child readers. McGough's work typically features clever manipulation of language, but looking at the subject matter and nature of the nonsensical, a change is evident, from the largely surreal to a combination of the surreal and comic bodily realism. McGough's rhyming picture book, *Mr. Noselighter* (1976), features a bizarre man with a candle instead of a nose and the text, along with its inclusion of gloomy nights and the sea, is reminiscent of Lear's nonsense poem, "Dong with a Luminous Nose" (1877/2001: 225–228). The slightly disturbing illustrations add a surreal effect to typical nonsense devices, including textual nonsensical contradictions, such as when readers learn that, as Mr. Noselighter is taking a cake to Grandma at night, lighting the way with his nose, he is wearing "red woolly socks/ to keep the ground off his feet" (1976: 7, my numbering). The bizarre illustrations include Mr. Noselighter sitting in a small boat in the sea opposite an unidentified, naked man who has no nose, and a drawing of a tree growing oranges and feet from its branches to accompany the text that tells how, "You couldn't tell an orange/ from a row of smelly toes" if you did not have a nose.

Such examples of surreal illustration, combined with nonsense verse, reveal a typical classic nonsense technique, common to Lear's work, of using pictorial illustration as a parallel text. The illustration supplements the written and highlights the strangeness of the juxtaposition, in this instance, of the incongruous—oranges and toes are not generally associated with each other. So this example of McGough's earlier work concentrates upon the surreal aspects of literary nonsense, with some elements of bodily realism.

McGough's later work moves on from this and includes clever nonsense wordplay, as seen in *The Great Smile Robbery* (1982), although it still contains a mix of the surreal, including Emerson's cupboard of smiles of every kind, which can be taken on and off like clothes. The range of nonsense wordplay in this text is extensive. It includes the creation of portmanteau words, such



Figure 3.2 Illustration from Roger McGough's *Mr. Noselighter* (1976), illustrated by André François, featuring surreal juxtapositions, in the manner of the artist Magritte, with the additional mention of bodily realism—the smelly toes.

as when Billie Bogie runs extremely fast, "fullpelting" (46), and when the sleepy cat, Sourpuss, speaks, the inquit tag is not a simple 'said'; readers learn she "meeyawned" her utterance (28). There is play with homonymic phrases too, which highlights the different meanings and usages of words which have the same spelling. The bus conductor shouts, "Fares please" and as Emerson reluctantly fumbles for his change, he thinks, "No they don't" (26). Emerson has unexpectedly turned the conductor's polite request for money into a statement in which 'please' is used as a verb; a statement which the complaining Emerson then contradicts. However, despite this emphasis upon wordplay humor, typical of classic nonsense, the text also now includes much humor of comic bodily realism, largely by means of the characters, The Stinkers, who "stunk" and "stinked", such as Billie Bogie, "who picked his nose for hours and hours, smashed, sneezed, and spat at flowers" (15). Again, typical of much nonsensical literature in the 1980s, McGough's award-winning poetry collection, *Sky in the Pie* (1983), features poems which provide evidence of the mix of the surreal and gross appetites, typical of early new wave nonsense already discussed. This is seen, for instance, in the poem "Today's Recipe—Book Soup", which tells how to cook a book with plenty of fat on it, to eat alongside "deep fried crispy bookworms" (1983: 83). This reveals that McGough's work, although still featuring much wordplay humor and the surreal, later came to include the comic grotesque, by way of gross, unusual foodstuffs, as well as comic bodily realism.

Moves To Outright Scatology

From the early 1980s, some nonsense texts start to become increasingly scatological, also featuring grotesques, whether people and/or behavior, which is a manifestation of what Siegel (1977) classes as the "comic grotesque". He claims this is a low form of comedy, related to farce, which treats subject matter which was previously unmentionable. According to Deluca and Natov, the comic grotesque is "robust and joyful in its embracing of the crude and outrageous" (1977: 6), and it can be seen, for instance, in the radical picture books of the French author, Tomi Ungerer, published in America, such as *Zeralda's Ogre* (1967). However, this move is not evident in the UK, within literature written specifically for junior readers, in any numbers, until the 1980s, possibly due to perceptions of an innate conservatism as regards cultural productions for youngsters and a strong retention of protectionist paradigms of childhood.

Dahl's work in the 1980s is typical of this move towards scatology. *The BFG* (1982) is well known for its use of nonsense wordplay, according to Sherrard-Smith (1982). Humor may emanate from the Giant's maloprisms; for example, when he tells Sophie that her brain is "full of rotten-wool" (1982: 49), instead of cotton wool. But among this frequent wordplay, there are many references to sometimes impossible and surreal bodily functions.

The giant refers to "foulsome belchy burps" and "whizzpopping" that, ludicrously, propel the giant into the air "with a series of the loudest and rudest noises Sophie had ever heard in her life" (66–69). The text also features visually repulsive grotesques, such as the hideous "Bloodbottler". Although Dahl had earlier written fiction which can be categorized as surreal, such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), comic references to bodily functions are not part of the humor of the nonsensical in that text. Much of the humor of the earlier text originates from the surreal nature of talking creatures traveling in a giant peach, and a heavy reliance on classic nonsense verse, which utilizes regular, predictable meter and rhythm, as seen, for example, in the centipede's nonsense verse in the form of limerick-style stanzas, with the usual *aabba* rhyme scheme.

Dahl's verse also illustrates the move to the comic grotesque and scatological, along with the surreal. *Dirty Beasts* (1983) is described on the back book jacket as "a ghastly assortment of wicked beasts getting up to some extraordinary and unmentionable things", which implies that this is seen as a significant 'selling-point' of a book aiming to attract young readers. Poems such as "The Cow" appear to live up to the advertising, as the cow, who lives with the poet, grows wings and drops a cow chip on the head of a spectator who dares to criticize. The appeal of this sort of humor for children is revealed in comments such as Tucker's, about Dahl's books, which he says provide "moments of scatological humour irresistible to children" (in Reynolds and Tucker, 1998: 15–16) and, indeed, Dahl himself believed that children had a coarser, more vulgar and even cruel sense of humor than adults (in Watson, 2001).

As well as providing further evidence of this scatological turn within nonsensical literature for children, Rosen's mix of verse and prose, *Hairy Tales and Nursery Crimes* (1985), reveals the use of grotesques which are not used for any satirical purpose; seemingly just for the fun of the incongruity, strangeness, even 'shock' value, although this aspect is often noticeable in the accompanying illustration, not the verse itself. The poem "My Hairy Baby", although typical of classic nonsense in its parody of the rhyme "London Bridge is falling down", features the unusual, visual 'shock' of the highly incongruous image of a young baby girl, complete in pretty dress, who is impossibly hirsute and is depicted with the face of Rosen. This may be particularly disturbing because of the extreme incongruity, even aberration, of a female infant having the face and beard of a grown man and impossibly hairy legs, akin to an ape, instead of the usual societal depiction of girl infants as pretty and smooth-skinned.

Much of the humor of the nonsense in this text emanates from the use of clever wordplay that is, undoubtedly, aided by the surreal pictures. For instance, when the text describes a woman going "to fill a bucket of daughter" in order to clean the cars, the accompanying illustration features a girl's face, presumably that of the daughter, within a bucket full of water. There is also,



Figure 3.3 Illustration from Michael Rosen's *Hairy Tales and Nursery Crimes* (1985), illustrated by Alan Baker, depicting the incongruous visual 'shock' of a hirsute female infant—"my hairy baby"—replacing the usual line, "My fair lady".

true to the gradual emergence of the 'comic grotesque', much humor of comic bodily realism. This can be seen in the story "Jack and the Tinstalk", when the giant bellows, "Fee fi fo fum/I smell the blood of an English bum" (1985: 12). The scatology, and punning, continues with 'Goldisocks and the Wee Bears', where the naughty Goldisocks "spat on a shiny wee hair that belonged to the shiny wee bear" (34), and also includes the "piddle-sized silly Ghost Gruff" (61). Rosen's use of the humor of outright scatology, then, combines with surreal images and clever wordplay, redolent of classic nonsense, and suggests a definite movement towards the inclusion of 'shocking' elements within nonsense for young readers.

Moves to 'Child-Centeredness' and the 'Comedy of Outrageousness'

Mallan suggests that the 'vulgar' and taboo-breaking aspect of children's texts reveal a more tolerant attitude by publishers and the general public, and, of course, this will also contribute to the child-centeredness of this sort of contemporary nonsensical literature. She believes that the publication of such 'vulgar' humour allows "what is essentially an oral tradition to appear in

print" (1993: 42–43), and she cites the Opies, collectors of children's folklore who traced scatological humor back to the nineteenth century in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), which indicates that this sort of humor has a long history.

Another possible contributory factor as regards the scatological turn in nonsensical children's literature may be related to arguments posited by Heyman (2003) and Lypp (1995). They both believe that there is less to protest and rebel against in contemporary society—Lypp says "contemporary humor often lacks surfaces of friction" (189). She argues that the world can no longer be turned upside down because, in our liberal society, all authority has withered and there is, for example, no binding educational canon, or authority, to be parodied or subverted and there are less specific targets. Despite this potential lack of targets to subvert—classic nonsense, for example, is known for its subversive parody of the social conventions and didactic education of the time—there does seem to be a rise in popularity of nonsense, which seems contradictory. I suggest, therefore, that some of the 'shock' and seemingly transgressive aspects in contemporary nonsense revolve around 'friction' and rebelling against the accepted bounds of decency of adult 'civilized' society, and not rebellion against any one specific discourse. The disturbing notions thrown up by the 'threat of the strange', and the irreverence of the satire and/or questioning of prevailing orthodoxies, typical of classic nonsense, have been joined and compounded by a "comedy of outrageousness" (Gutwirth's term, 1993) that has not previously been sanctioned (by being published) in literature for this age of readership. This comedy of outrageousness largely centers upon my third type of subversive/transgressive humor, in which taboo subjects, such as the openly scatological, are now commonly utilized in humorous literature for junior readers, contrary to the accepted rules of 'polite', ordered society, in which such 'rudeness' is usually curbed. This attempt to shock leads to the combination of aspects of classic nonsense and the surreal with the 'gross-out', grotesque factor, and even the preponderance of scatological humor. Again, this sort of humor is, in theory at least, more inclusive, as most individuals, of whatever age, ability, and experience, should be able to access this lavatorial humor, even if they deplore it.

New Wave Nonsense and Transgression

The contemporary linking of classic nonsense (especially wordplay), the surreal, the scatological, and the gross is now evident in novels, in which the mix of the surreal, nonsensical, and the scatological is now the most transgressive aspect, rather than the surreal and nonsensical combined with the satirical and/or philosophical, as in earlier nonsense fiction such as Rosen's *You're Thinking About Doughnuts* (1987). This seemingly more child-centered fiction combines classic nonsense devices along with scatological humor. Killeen's *My Sister's A Burp* (1999) widely utilizes nonsensical

wordplay, such as the creation of neologisms ("whirling and gefurdling") and ridiculous, humorous names ("Nurse Whoppergob"). The text also features double meanings which require the typical nonsense interplay between text and illustration, such as the word "bill", which in the text refers to the doctor's invoice, while the accompanying illustration features a duck's bill, and the text also utilizes complex vocabulary, typical of classic nonsense, such as 'chasm' and 'cacophony'. The text is surreal, featuring talking teeth, tonsils that want to play 'I-spy', and a cat that obtains mom's credit card in order to go out and buy a cat suit. The plot revolves around Zeke, who is accidentally swallowed by his mom (he has previously been shrunk by his sister), and this gives plenty of scope for nonsensical humor featuring strong comic bodily realism, even scatological, 'gross out' humor. Readers learn of the "waves of spit" and "goeysopphspittle" (16), and there is a gross and surreal episode in which the 'snot' in mom's nose talks, with nasal secretions featuring heavily again when mom sneezes, splattering "goop all over" as she ejects Zeke and Eppie, who are encased inside a ball of 'snot'. Even mom's sentimental memories include the time Zeke vomited on Grandma and baby Eppie pooped on Pop, so scatology clearly features prominently in this new wave nonsense text.

Blake's *Stinky Finger's House of Fun* (2005) is a surreal, sci-fi fantasy/nonsensical mix that also features much scatological humor. This new wave nonsense text contains classic nonsense's preponderance for wordplay and a highlighting of dual meanings, as seen in the surreal scene, when Icky is trapped in an armchair in the Living Living Room, and the chair literally has its arms wrapped around him. It also features the surreal and the absurd, such as Stinky's Uncle Nero's disembodied, talking head living in a mailbox asking for a cup of tea, and war-like pigs holding siege outside the house, demanding a pork pie. However, there is much scatological and 'gross-out' humor, as evidenced in scenes such as when Bryan is stuck in the back end of a pantomime horse with Stinky and is the victim of much "parping", and also when Bryan admits to eating blisters. The plot is resolved happily by the exploding life forms in Stinky's underpants, which ultimately save the boys from a doomsday scenario in the city of the future by firing them out into time and space.

However, typical of new wave nonsense texts, the book also features an element of satire, such as the covert comment about the dangers of popular entertainment, especially on digital and satellite channels on television. The plot features "the most popular program in the world ever", including "cooking, extreme sports, and attractive people in their bathers, with a rollover jackpot of £30 billion" (2005: 25-26), which has to be watched constantly for five years to be won. While humans (especially adults) are thus occupied, the alien invaders, the Spoonheads, are able to land on Earth and invade with no resistance. However, I suggest that, like contemporary nonsense containing satire in the vein of classic nonsense discussed earlier, the reader's memory of the book may be more likely to center upon the mix of scatological,

surreal, and nonsense humor, given its prominence and shock value. So the implied reader's "gestalt" may be less likely to involve the less obvious satirical aspect, hence, yet again, the nature of transgression may come from *scatological* humor mixed with surreal nonsense, not the *satirical* combined with the nonsense and surreal aspects. I suggest that texts such as Blake's *Stinky Fingers* reveal a linkage of the nonsense that Reynolds (2007) classes as being on the comic spectrum (rather 'silly', in the oral tradition) with literary nonsense, which she posits has aesthetic qualities and is more complex, dealing with philosophical and/or political issues, but in an apparently simple way. This newer development of the compounding of increasingly disparate forms of humor within children's literature provides evidence of some acceptance of the emergent paradigm of childhood, particularly as regards faith in children's abilities.

Another possible factor in the prominence of scatology within new wave nonsense is highlighted by James, who suggests that subversion/transgression has now "become thoroughly inscribed within mass culture—and, in particular, youth culture—in the last few decades" (2002: 25), so the seemingly transgressive is now big business and is often appropriated by the mass market. Mallan (1993) and James (2002) both argue that the attraction of this sort of transgression is not new, revealing that 'vulgar' and taboo forms of humor have been around for hundreds of years. Of course, that which is considered vulgar or taboo by a society is culturally relative, and humor that was considered taboo a hundred years ago is less likely to be viewed as such today, due to the vast differences in circumstances and contexts. In addition, because of the increase in the amount of books being published and the ever-widening diversity in children's publishing, representing a wider cross-section of the population than ever before, books featuring this kind of scatology within nonsensical humor are becoming much more common.

Changing Notions of 'Childhood' and 'Adulthood'

The seemingly subversive side of contemporary mass culture, particularly youth culture, highlighted by James, may also form part of any explanation for the appeal of new wave nonsense texts for adults, such as Gervais' *Flanimal* books (2004 onwards) and John Hegley's *My Dog is a Carrot* (2002), even though, as already illustrated, much contemporary nonsense has moved away from that which is more likely to be viewed as adult-centered, into more 'child-centered' new wave nonsense. Numerous theorists mention the blurring of boundaries between adults and children and/or the 'paedocratisation' (Hartley's term, 1987) of adults. Meyrowitz suggests that "many of the adults who have come of age within the last twenty years (since the late 1960s) continue to speak, dress and act like overgrown children", so that what seems to be happening is "an overall merging of childhood and adulthood" (1987: 612). Holland argues that market values have now come together with 'childish'

values, with the production of goods which make no pretense at usefulness and depend on the creation and potential gratification of desires which have much in common with what she calls "childish spontaneity" and "libidinous pleasure" (1996: 161). Adults can be attracted to such goods so that they can share "childish indulgencies instead of censoring and limiting them", thus extending adults' "nostalgic pleasure" (158). Holland argues this has occurred because of an increasingly deregulated commercial and media environment of free-market economic liberalism. This sort of anxiety is not new, however. Reynolds cites Claudia Nelson who notes, referring to the Victorian period, that "some contemporary critics saw the popularity of children's fiction with adults as a symptom of 'social degeneration'" (2007: 12).

Such contemporary arguments obviously fuel debates about the end of children's literature by the likes of Griswold (1997) and Nikolavjeva (1998), especially when paired with what Metcalf calls "the price to pay" for today's "empowerment of the child", as children are "forced to grow up sooner, learn language games and participate in them", so that actually authors are now "addressing more precocious children who share more experiences with adults than children did a generation or two ago" (1997: 53). Many commentators, such as Postman (1983), Winn (1984), and Kline (1993), choose to perceive these developments negatively, lamenting the 'disappearance of childhood' and bemoaning the emergence of more 'knowing' children, focusing on notions of adult power and perceptions of children's 'innate' vulnerability. It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss the pros and cons of such arguments, but what is of note is that contemporary nonsense for junior readers, which includes new wave nonsense, often acknowledges this earlier 'maturity' and innate abilities of younger children through the inclusion of high forms of cognitive humor.

As well as this common critical belief in a blending of high and low, adult and child cultures, as mentioned by many commentators, it must be remembered that, crucially, contemporary notions of childhood have also altered. True, new wave nonsense texts may be more 'child-centric' in that they largely consist of low humorous forms such as farce and lower humorous properties like slapstick and scatological episodes, but now, partly because of the zeitgeist of children's rights and competencies, that which can be included as 'child-centric' has expanded, as children are often considered as being able to cope with, and appreciate, the darker aspects of life. Such ideas about children may be evident in the deliberate inclusion of black humor within many new wave nonsense texts and their profusion of surreal and 'gross-out' forms and properties of humor.

Black Humor and Nonsense in the Classic Vein

Bill Ott, with regard to the 'nastiness' of classic nonsense for children, states how children "laugh freely at the brutal absurdity of a divided jugular artery"

(1989: 42), and Gangopadhyay points out how classic nonsense literature, including nursery rhymes, is "steeped in bad humour and negative emotions", such as anger, scorn, fear, or horror (2004: 43). It is certainly true that this darker side of nonsense has long been present. Lear's limericks in *A Book of Nonsense* (1846/2001) are described by Thomas as "grotesque and violent" (1985: 120). Verses include, for example, the 'Old Person of Buda' who is hammered, the 'Old man of Peru' who is baked, and the work also features Ott's reference, the 'Old Person of Tartary, "who divided his jugular artery" (2001: 50). Characters in Carroll's *Alice* texts are mostly unpleasant and violent. The Queen, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), makes constant entreaties to cut off other character's heads, as seen in Alice's first meeting with the Queen, and the King threatens to execute the Hatter. Haldane's *My Friend Mr. Leakey* (1937) features Pompey, the dragon, who bites off a jinn's nose, and the text features the surreal black humor of rats hanging on to the toes of a night-watchman, with the toes eventually coming away from the foot, cartoon-style. These examples serve to reveal the long-standing existence of black humor within classic nonsense and early twentieth-century texts which follow similar patterns of humor.

The far-fetched nature of gruesome black humor can also be seen in Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) which, parodying the convention, within children's literature, of being rid of parental intervention early in the story, tells how James' mom and dad "suddenly got eaten up . . . by an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London Zoo" (7). This sentence is followed immediately, quite typically, by 'relief' from the unease caused by the gruesomeness, by the humorous understatement, "Now this, as you can well imagine, was a rather nasty experience for two such gentle parents" (ibid). So even though Dahl's text utilizes comic relief to counter 'seriousness', a common occurrence in children's nonsense, it does reveal the continued use of unrealistic, cartoon-like, black humor.

The far-fetched, surreal 'cartoon-like' violence of classic nonsense and indeed new wave nonsense can serve as what Gangopadhyay terms "emotional insulation" (2004: 44). The strangeness and incongruity of the violence and unpleasantness can actually work to distance the reader from any emotional response as the actions are so extreme and totally unrealistic. According to McGhee (in Goldstein and McGhee, 1972), such seemingly terrible and gruesome events can help to create a 'playful' frame of mind, enabling individuals to interpret the events as comic fantasy, not horror. However, the presence of, and in some cases, increase in, black humor in new wave nonsense texts, written specifically for children (and not in texts which were written with an eye to an adult audience) may be telling. This change may be partly due to the fact that the 'dark' aspect of children's psyches is now more acknowledged. Prout speaks of how, by the mid-twentieth century, "psychological discourses of the child" were becoming part of "a more general public consciousness" (2005: 51). Again, looking at wider societal trends, the popularity of humor

in the vein of *Monty Python* may also have contributed towards this increase in black humor. Wagg refers to the "strong strain of cruelty" (1992: 270) running through *Monty Python* (and the last successful film was released as late as 1983) and there certainly seems to be a trend, steadily increasing from the early 1980s, towards what some commentators term "infant black comedy"¹⁶. Yet again, this indicates a widening of subject matter and tone which adults now believe is suitable for young children, signalling a reduction in the protectionism, typical of older world views concerning childhood, which promotes the necessity of protecting children from 'unsuitable' aspects of the adult world.

Black Humor and New Wave Nonsense

Dahl's verse, such as his irreverent fairy-tale revisions in *Revolting Rhymes* (1982), reveals this surreal and gruesome black humor. In "The Three Little Pigs", readers, who have already seen Little Red Riding Hood shoot the wolf in the previous poem, learn how she comes to the aid of the third little pig under attack from the wolf. She kills the wolf but the end stanza ends on a macabre note that readers may pick up on:

For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes
 Not only has *two* wolfskin coats
 But when she goes from place to place,
 She has a PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE.
 (1982: 47)

Some of Colin West's nonsense verse has a similar tone and includes, for instance, "Vicious Verses", in which a bear eats Little Barbara in Scarborough (1982: 75). These examples suggest that black humor is present in poetry written with young children in mind.

This 'darkness' can also be seen in contemporary poetry which is acknowledged as having adult appeal. John Hegley's collection of verse, *My Dog is a Carrot* (2002), features strange, incongruous, and surreal subjects for poems, such as organic leeks which speak and dogs that wear glasses. His verse is also often perceived as rather dark; a review states that Hegley uses "light verse for a mordant purpose"¹⁷. I contend that some of Hegley's poetry can be classed as new wave nonsense verse, which features black humor among the weird, the surreal, and the 'gross', as seen in "Pat and the Wizard". The poem is nonsensical and it includes absurdity of content, becoming more and more surreal as the poem progresses. After Pat has "cycled round to see her Uncle Matt the wizard/ even though her tyres were flat/ and there was a blizzard", the strange uncle looks inside his hat. A typical nonsense transformation, which is also a crazy impossibility, takes place, as the previously empty hat spits out a pair of glasses that enable Pat to see that the world is not flat. The random notion of

Pat wanting to tell her cat about this discovery is also rather bizarre. The surreal then mixes with black humor:

she didn't know her cat was dead
splatted flat by Uncle Fred
it's lucky Uncle Matt was skilled
at mending cats his brother killed
and that's exactly what he did
and all he charged was fifty pence.

(2002: 23)

Nash points out how abuse of meter, 'lawless' rhythm, denial of expectation and, I would add here, the uneven, unusual rhyme scheme, can also "signal humor and highlight nonsense" (1985, in Anderson and Apseloff 47-49), in contrast to the well-known, overt strict adherence to predictable rules and patterns of classic, nineteenth-century nonsense verse, in which form is paramount. All Nash's alternative prerequisites for nonsense are fulfilled in this poem. The meter is uneven, particularly in the earlier part of the poem, and the rhyme scheme throughout is also erratic. The first five lines of the poem have an unusual *abcac* rhyme scheme, while the majority of the latter part consists of typical nonsense-verse rhyming couplets. The denial of expectation and surprise, characteristic of both nonsense and incongruity forms of humor, comes at the very end of the poem, as the final word does not rhyme with the word 'did' as might be assumed. In fact, the words "and all he charged was fifty pence" add to a typical nonsense doubt about meaning. Who does Uncle Matt charge, and for what? Does he charge Pat for helping her discover that the world is not flat, or does he charge for 'mending' the cat (which is, of course, another nonsensical possibility as it is impossible to 'mend' a cat which has been "splatted flat"), and if so, who pays for that—Uncle Fred, the killer, or Pat, the cat's owner? Yet again, the indeterminacy of this nonsensical poem, combined with its black humor, renders it typical of literature that acknowledges young children's abilities to cope with ambiguity and even find humor in death, and issues of black humor will be further discussed in Chapter 5, "Funny and Fearful: The Comic Gothic and Incongruity".

Conclusion

My research suggests a current millennial trend for young children's literature featuring the broadly nonsensical. This is perhaps due to the fact that nonsense is typical of *fin de siècle* writing in its complex mix of ambiguities and paradoxes, compounded by millennial anxieties that highlight tensions between fear and hope, idiosyncrasy, and convention

(McGillis, 2003). As part of this contemporary vogue, numerous nonsense classics have been reissued, such as Eric Linklater's *The Wind on the Moon* (1944/2000) and Haldane's *My Friend Mr. Leakey* (1937/2004), and established writers not previously known for their nonsense writing have produced nonsensical texts. For example, the children's author, Dick King-Smith, well known for his animal tales, published *Under the Mish-Mash Trees* in 2005, which features the nonsense creatures, the slobbadunk and the gombrizils, and celebrity authors, such as Ricky Gervais, have chosen to publish works such as the highly successful nonsensical picture books, *Flanimals* (2004) and its sequels.

This recent trend marks the culmination of numerous developments and changes within nonsense for children since the 1960s. These moves include the increasing incorporation of surreal and absurd elements which constitute the outrageousness and 'shock' of the 'threat of the strange', my second type of subversive/transgressive humor, as well as the later transmutation of these elements to include the 'comic grotesque' and even scatology (my third type of 'subversive/transgressive' humor). These recent developments, added to facets of classic nonsense, particularly the fascination with wordplay, have resulted in the formation of new wave nonsense texts. These works—which constitute a new sub-genre of contemporary nonsensical children's literature—contain more ambiguous, contrary, and increasingly disparate compounds of high and low forms and properties of humor than ever before seen in literature written specifically for junior readers. High, cognitive, complex forms of humor, such as satire and irony, which are generally considered sophisticated, and which also, typical of classic nonsense, have a more serious side and are therefore more likely to be perceived as 'adult', are combined with additional properties of low humor, such as the comic grotesque and the scatological. Such low forms of humor, newly included in texts for this age of reader, compound with the perennial low humor staple of classic nonsense; violent slapstick. The new compounds of seemingly paradoxical kinds of humor can be seen as representative of the increasing blurring of distinctions between the adult and the child in contemporary society, evident in the gradual growth of equality between the child and adult.

The conflicting dichotomies (high and low forms and properties of humor), typical of classic nonsense, can be reduced to the basic opposition of the 'adult' and the 'child', and this culturally-imposed separation is indicative of prevalent developmental beliefs in society about children's innate difference to adults. As the properties of low humor are so pervasive and are generally the most prominent humorous qualities in new wave nonsense texts, it could be argued that these texts are more 'childish', thus playing to, and reinforcing, common societal perceptions of the less developed sensibilities and 'lesser' cognitive functioning of children. This emphasis upon children's essential difference from adults reflects the more negative side of protectionist paradigms of childhood. However, even though I argue that the balance

of various forms and properties of humor has altered since the 1970s, so that nonsensical literature has gradually become more 'child centric' (as opposed to the double address and adult bias of classic nonsense), my detailed analysis of the changes in usage of satire, along with recognition of the inclusion of black humor in texts written specifically for children, can reveal evidence of more positive perceptions of children as active, perceptive, and capable.

The gradual increase in the subtlety of humorous satire, by being less overt and hidden among more prominent forms of low humor, such as toilet humor, implies that young children are trusted to access and appreciate this satire. It must also be remembered that, as new wave nonsense texts are written specifically for children or the child-like, the inclusion of higher forms of what were once considered 'adult' humor suggest they are now seen as suitable and likely to be appreciated by young readers. However, concomitant with the existence of an array of competing paradigms of childhood in society, many of which have a long history and a tenacious hold, some texts, such as Antrobus' *Help! I am a Prisoner in a Toothpaste Factory*, do utilize comic relief to diffuse the seriousness of any satire, to make it more acceptable to both child reader and adult co-reader. This use of comic relief may be indicative of the continued hold of the protectionist paradigm, as it reveals less faith in children's abilities to cope with undiluted 'seriousness'. The utilization of comic relief may also indicate an underestimation of children, by implying beliefs in children's inability to comprehend and appreciate the sophistication and cognitive complexity of the classic nonsense practice of combining the serious and the comic in the *one* nonsense device. I suggest that these subconscious textual constructions constitute evidence of the uneven and hesitant acceptance of the emergent paradigm, as notions of protectionism are still apparent.

So, within new wave nonsense texts in particular, the humor of the 'child' and the 'adult', the 'high' and the 'low', and the 'grave and the gay', have become compounded in even more complex ways so that they are no longer, if in fact they ever were, simple binaries. Although this increase in an ambiguity that is already inherent in classic nonsense reveals contemporary societal inconsistencies in perceptions of, and attitudes towards, children, I suggest that the development of new wave nonsense texts reveals evidence of a gradual acceptance of the emergent paradigm. Implicit in this notion is the perception of young children as active agents in, as well as products of, social processes, and it reveals a faith in young children's abilities and competencies that is generally less predominant in other more traditional humorous genres.