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**Power to the child:
interaction in four contemporary
children's poets**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gone were nicely brought up children; instead, they were fighting about trivia, bonding with their friends, contradicting grown-ups, getting the better of their teachers.

Morag Styles, *From the Garden to the Street*¹

Children's poetry is defined as poetry by its form, and by children as both its audience and main subject. At the convergence of these seemingly definite lines, lies an enormous and complex body of work, whose boundaries with "adult poetry" are often blurred. As with other kinds of literature, we marvel at the variety of styles and themes it encompasses. Children are naturally receptive to poetry because of its patterns and overall musicality. Since birth, they are exposed to poetical constructions, such as lullabies and nursery rhymes. To investigate children's poetry is, therefore, to explore our very first contacts with literature itself.

Like all literature, poetry provides us with information on the society and culture of its time. From that point of view, children's poetry is a treasure trove, because of its role in the formation of young minds. It tells us what kind of theme, language and style society deems appropriate for children; thus, society's view of childhood itself becomes apparent. Moreover, it tells us what values, notions and ideas authors as adults want to pass on to children, what kind of adults they would like to contribute to create; thus, society's view of itself becomes apparent as well, often through the criticism of poets. Besides, children's poetry follows the literary and poetical trends of its time, and many authors that wrote for adults, such as Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, or more recently Jackie Kay, have used verse to express engaging insights into the children's world.

¹ Styles 1998, p. 263.

Therefore, an overview of children's poetry provides us with information on both the concepts of childhood and the poetic structures that were relevant at the time of writing. I aim to focus this analysis on the evolution of the depiction of the child both as a character and as a reader; I will then explore some of the themes and issues and outline a few among the many poetical forms. The poets taken into account are landmark authors and establish a progression in time, from the 17th century to contemporary poetry. Within this historical overview, I shall also concentrate on children's interactions. Children are mainly interactive beings, and learn to live through contacts with adults and peers. These two kinds of interaction build worlds that follow different sets of rules. From 17th century devotional and didactic verse to contemporary children's poetry, this investigation gives us insight on adult visions of children's behaviour, models and values, and the kind of structures poets use to display their point of view.

I will start from the historical background, and then focus my analysis on contemporary children's poetry and the interpretation of childhood it embraces. Children's portrayal is a controversial issue, because it is a combination of adults' perception, wishes and experiences about childhood. I will therefore address the question of how contemporary authors view and portray children, analysing the same areas taken into account in the historical overview.

Since its beginnings, contemporary children's poetry was considered revolutionary because of the language, structures and subjects it deployed. The generation of what was called at first "urchin verse", met with both enthusiastic and appalled reviews from critics and an immediate success with the public.

However, my analysis does not aim at reinforcing the concept of contemporary children's poetry as an exceptional, unpredictable trend. On the contrary, I will follow and show a consistent thread of evolution visible since the beginnings of children's poetry; this path through history leads to the undoubtedly new approach to poetical structures and language in the work of

many authors of contemporary poetry. From the 17th century to today, poetry heads towards children's empowerment, starting from the definition of children as a different category to adults. Authors endorse and explore their specificity more and more and outline it in different ways according to their sensibility and their times. However, most of them appear to share criticism towards their own society; some harbour longing for their own childhood, whilst others relate better to children than to other adults. Thus, the poet that writes for children is often an outcast, or at least someone who looks at the world from an unusual perspective.

Contemporary poets for children compose their own colourful and musical current: they play with slang, dialects and creole, and embed this language within free and inventive poetical structures. They write about themes and issues relevant to children in a contemporary world, such as ecology, multicultural society and the change in families and relationships. I will focus my research on four authors that stand as interpreters of the peak of this tendency nowadays: John Agard, Jackie Kay, Grace Nichols and Michael Rosen. Although these authors have some traits in common in terms of themes and style, each of them has a personal way to address and depict children, and to see their own role: in other words, each of them has a different way to be a poet.

2. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CHILDREN'S POETRY: AN OVERVIEW

This historical overview of the evolution of children's poetry takes into account social factors, such as concepts of childhood and life condition of children, and literary factors, such as poetic tendencies, which shape poetry for children. Within this heterogeneous field, I will discuss some important chronological and stylistic landmark authors.

The first examples of poetry addressed to children date back to the 17th century. It stemmed from educational purposes, and served as an alphabetisation tool. Many among the first authors were Puritans, and religion is the main theme of their poetry. They portray children as incomplete and sinful beings in need of education and religious guidance.

The Romantic Era marked a shift in the concept of childhood. Romantic poets depicted children either as ambassadors of a bucolic world long lost, or as victims of exploitation by industrial society. Children became the embodiment of innocence and nature, a view that would last in children's literature. Nonsense poetry contradicts this tendency. Authors play with sounds and meanings, and explore children's taste for wordplay, black humour and inversion of reality. Nonsense poems appeal to children's rebellious tendencies.

During the first half of the 20th century, children's poetry expressed many sides to childhood, light sides such as games and dark sides such as solitude. Nevertheless, most authors conveyed a sense of nostalgia for their own childhood, which they perceived as the best part of life. The second half of 20th century brought forth a new generation of poets who chose to depict the urban reality of children in more irregular verse forms. These authors express the challenges of contemporary multicultural English society, and constitute an enlivening force in English children's poetry.

Poetry for children follows and sometimes disputes the cultural and social tendencies of its time. Contemporary poetry embodies a society in continuous evolution, where children try to find their own place.

2.1. DEVOTIONAL AND DIDACTICAL POETRY: JOHN BUNYAN

The beginnings of poetry for children date back to the 17th century. Children were already very familiar with poetry; poetry was present among their readings much more than nowadays. Humorous poems in chapbooks were widely popular, as were folk tales in form of ballads; educational books often used verse to raise the appeal of school subjects. The change started when authors began to address children openly. Most of these poets were religious dissidents, like John Bunyan and Isaac Watts, and their poetry had a religious and didactic purpose. To save children from sin, they made an effort to catch their attention. They experiment with structure and content: among their production, hymns and songs had a longer life because of their musical qualities. Their poetry is 'extremely devout', as Grenby states in his *Children's Literature* [2008], yet the first signs of a compromise with children's taste are visible. They are the first to give an identity to children and define them as an audience.

John Bunyan is the author of the first book of children's poetry. He was a writer and a nonconformist preacher. His religious views caused him to spend 12 years in prison, during which he composed his most famous work, the religious allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*. His collection of poems for children dates back to 1686. It had a complicated publishing history: from 1701 a shortened version was available for a long time, before the original was adventurously retrieved. The original version had the title *A Book for Boys and Girls; or, Country Rhymes for Children in Verse on Seventy-Four Things*, whereas the shortened edition was published as *Divine Emblems*.

The book contains 72 poems in the form of emblems. The emblem form consists of two parts, the description of an object or a situation and a meditation on its deeper meaning or symbolic value. The first part of an emblem is often an illustration. In *A Book for Boys and Girls* [1686] Bunyan builds his emblems using mostly animals or objects as a starting point. All of the poems provide rules of behaviour for children, according to the author's

view on faith. Despite the austerity of the main theme, Bunyan made efforts to communicate with his audience.

Wherefore good Reader, that I save them may,
I now with them, the very Dottrill play.
And since at Gravity they make a Tush,
My very Beard I cast behind the Bush.
And like a Fool start fing'ring of their Toys,
And all to show them they are Girls and Boys.

[Bunyan, 1686]

In the preface to *A Book for Boys and Girls*, the author states his recipients; the book addresses 'Boys and Girls'. The author displays indulgence towards children; adult sinners deserve to be punished, whereas children need guidance to avoid distractions and sin. The author criticizes men and women who behave like children; he complains that he has to disguise his serious aim under a puerile appearance to catch their interest:

Our Bearded men, do act like Beardless Boys;
Our Women please themselves with childish Toys.
[...]
Nor do I blush, although I think some may
Call me a Baby, 'cause I with them play:
I do't to shew them how each Fingle-fangle,
On which they doting are, their Souls entangle

[Bunyan 1686]

Bunyan defines children as frivolous creatures, as shown by the lexicon that he uses in the introduction: 'childish Toys', 'play', 'Fingle-fangle'. Thus, he gives us the first definition of childhood in children's poetry: a potentially dangerous state of unawareness and joyful shallowness. Childhood can be permanent unless corrected: children only grow up when they accept the true teachings of the faith. If they fail to do so, they become childish adults, entangled in trivial matters. The rhyme between 'Fingle-fangle' and 'entangle' is especially revealing: trifles like games and toys lead children's souls to

damnation. The author formulates a negative concept of childhood: children – and childish adults – lack faith, guidance, and moral, therefore they lack a purpose in their life. He aims to be their guide and teacher, and save them. Sin and salvation of the soul are the main topics. The poems are either lessons on the sinful nature of humankind or prayers to divine providence. Bunyan frequently uses animals such as snails, spiders, bees and hens as symbols in the first part of his emblems. Most symbols represent sinful behaviours.

The book contains 74 poems. The first two set the religious theme and the intended audience of the work: “Meditation upon the Ten Commandments” opens the book, followed by a “lamentation” by a child who repents of his sins. Most of the other poems keep the emblem structure: the first lines describe a situation, an animal, an object, and a second section named “comparison” unfolds the symbolic values of the image.

A typical example is the meditation “Upon the lark and the fowler”. A cautionary tale in verse, it warns children against dangerous temptations.

Look, there's the Fowler, prethee come away.
Dost not behold the Net? Look there 'tis spread,
Venture a little further thou art dead.
Is there not room enough in all the Field
For thee to play in, but thou needs must yield
To the deceitful glitt'ring of a Glass,
Plac'd betwixt Nets to bring thy death to pass?
[...] Take no heed to the Fowler's tempting Call;
This whistle he enchanteth Birds withal.
Or if thou seest a live Bird in his net,
Believe she's there 'cause thence she cannot get.

[Bunyan 1686]

The situation is clear. Children are supposed to empathise with the bird and be scared of the fowler. The description of the traps and dangers is very accurate, to entice imagination. Events unfold in a dramatic way, filled with suspense. The poem appeals to children's fascination with death, and their attraction to animals. The simple lark tempted by the fowler's trap represents

“a shadow of a saint/under allurings, ready now to faint” [Bunyan 1686]. The fowler is the devil. An external voice represents wisdom and warns readers about the devil’s tricks. The fowler’s baits are especially interesting: the ‘glittering Glass’, the ‘tempting Call’ of a ‘whistle’ and ‘a live Bird’. These objects are familiar to hunters; however, we can also imagine them as children’s toys. Such decoys would likely tempt both the small, simple lark and the small, simple child. The meditation of this emblem explains the glass as a symbol of ‘sinful pleasure’ and the bird as a representation of a sinner. The net and whistle are ‘figures of all evil’. The reader can imagine the “shadow of a saint’ as an adult with a weak faith: sinful pleasures and bad companies can easily lead him on a sinful path. Bunyan’s warnings work on many levels: obvious decoys like toys and objects can easily tempt children and animals, whereas sin does the same for adults.

Opposed to this poem is the meditation “Upon the bee”. This very short poem represents honey as a symbol of pleasure and the bee with its sting as a symbol of sin that often accompanies pleasure. The killing of the bee is right and necessary as a metaphor of mortifying sin in order to enjoy pleasure without risk.

The Bee goes out and Honey home doth bring;
And some who seek that Hony find a sting.
Now wouldst thou have the Hony and be free
From stinging; in the first place kill the Bee.

[Bunyan 1686]

Bunyan shows in this book a deep knowledge of children. As heavy to digest as his piousness may be, he creates clear and lively images in his poetry. Sweetness appeals to children, and he often uses sweet food in his emblems: in this case, honey represents the sweetness of life. The killing of the bee can appeal to children too, as they often have an ambiguous relationship with animals. They often hunt insects, play with them and kill them. The bee has a sting, so killing it is acceptable, because it is not harmless.

Other poems of the book show a more complex structure and intention. The “Lamentation of the awakened child”, the second poem of the book, strikes a

rather dramatic note. The child recalls his descent into sin and repents, out of fear that he will not receive the Lord's pardon. His sins appear ridiculously small – lying, running up and down and playing instead of praying.

9.

When other Children prayed,
That work I then delayed,
Ran up and down and played,
And thus from God have strayed.

10.

Had I in God delighted,
And my wrong doing's righted;
I had not thus been frightened,
Nor as I am benighted.

[Bunyan 1686]

The poem is composed by quatrains with a single rhyme. The quatrains are numbered. Every line contains at least one verb, and they are all either past or passive. Almost every line ends on a past simple, or a past participle. The rhyme in “-ed” dominates the poem, and emphasises the desolate tone of the poem. The past forms represent the child's regret, and the passive forms represent the forces that lead him:

Would God I might be saved,
Might have an heart like *David*;
This I have sometimes craved,
Yet am by sin enslaved!

[Bunyan 1686]

God and sin can decide this child's fate; he needs to choose a path. This is the only quatrain where a name appears at the end of a line: David is the model the child needs to follow if he wants to save his soul. The last quatrain ends the lamentation with an invocation to God:

O Lord! Do not disdain me,

But kindly entertain me;
Yea in thy Faith maintain me,
And let thy Love constrain me!

[Bunyan 1686]

The child submits himself to the Lord's will. The anaphora of 'me' at the end of the lines marks the difference from the rest of the poem. The only hope for the child's salvation resides in faith and love. The poem confirms Bunyan's puritan vision of children who need guidance: this child speaker begs God to 'constrain' him with his love.

Emblem poems prevail in this book; however, Bunyan also employs other structures. These poems are longer and more complex than Bunyan's emblems, and convey a more complete view of his attitude towards children.

The poem "The sinner and the spider" plays out like a theatrical dialogue. The humanization of the animal is a classical device in children's literature, and the mix of fascination and revulsion associated with spiders can prove very appealing to children.

Sinner
A Spider, Ay, also a filthy Creature.
Spider
Not filthy as thyself, in Name or Feature:
My name intailed is to my Creation;
My feature's from the God of thy Salvation.
[...]
I know thou art a Creature far above me,
Therefore I shun, I fear, and also love thee.
But tho thy God hath made thee such a Creature
Thou hast against him often play'd the Traitor.

[Bunyan 1686]

The sinner insults the spider as a vile and sinful creature, but the spider replies that God created him as such, whereas the sinner is far worse because he perverted his own saintly nature into a sinful one. In this poem, Bunyan

uses animals as example again. Bunyan expresses the fundamental difference between animals and humans: animals behave according to their nature, whereas humans can act against their own nature. Bunyan pursues his teaching purpose here, and admonishes children not to pervert their nature of superior creatures; at the same time, he explains to them different kinds of sin through the spider's webs:

For since I set my Webs in sundry places,
I shew men go to Hell in diverse traces
One I set in the window, that I might
Shew, some go to Hell with Gospel-light.
One I set in a Corner, as you see,
To shew, how some in secret snared be.
Gross Webs great store I set in darksome places,
To shew, how many sin with brazen faces.
Another Web I set aloft on high,
To shew, there's some professing men must dye.

[Bunyan 1686]

If a spider can show the reader the ways to sin and salvation, Bunyan shows children that God's wisdom is evident in all creation, and they must learn to recognise it and follow it.

The poem "Upon the disobedient child" almost reverses the balance between children and adults; parents are subjugated by their own offspring. Disobedient children cause great pain to parents who have nurtured them and cared for them in every possible way. The lack of a visible punishment for the disobedient child – except a vague "path that leads to hell" – creates a sense of uneasiness. Bunyan vividly describes the horrid disobedience of the child and the sadness and humiliation of his parents:

Children become, while little, our delights
When they grow bigger, they begin to fright's,
Their sinful Nature prompts them to rebel,
And to delight in Paths that lead to Hell.
[...]

They'l by wrong doings, under Parents, gather
And say, it is no Sin to rob a Father,
They'l jostle Parents out of place and Pow'r,
They'l make themselves the Head, and them devour.
[...]
But now, behold, how they rewarded are!
For their Indulgent Love, and tender Care!
All is forgot, this Love he doth despise,
They brought this Bird up to pick out their Eyes.

[Bunyan 1686]

Here, Bunyan makes an extensive use of metaphors to build disturbing images: a striking example is the child as the 'Head' that devours parents. The poem culminates in the gruesomely fascinating metaphor of the child as a bird who picks out his parents' eyes. The poem stands as an unsettling warning for parents who spoil their children. In the whole book, this poem provides the most explicit glance into Bunyan's perception of the relationship between children and adults. In his vision, children need guidance and control to find the right path, and parents need to educate children strictly in order to save them.

In this book, John Bunyan shows a deep educational purpose and a first-hand knowledge of children's tastes; however, the pervasive religious theme makes it heavy for young readers. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was going to be much more successful among children and meet the purpose of education through symbols. Even so, *A Book for Boys and Girls* remains among the first works to define children as a separate entity to adults. Bunyan sees children as easily distracted and tempted by sin, but even so, he deems them responsible enough to make the best choices if they receive the right teachings.

2.2. ROMANTICISM AND THE INNOCENT CHILD: WILLIAM BLAKE

The rise of romantic ideas in the 18th century changed the view on childhood. In the middle of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic Movement was seeking forms of natural wisdom. Romantic intellectuals adopted children as symbols of their principles: spontaneity and imagination. Writers also conveyed their concern for contemporary issues in their poems. Child labour was a subject of many works during this period, and authors contributed to raise awareness towards the life condition of many children. Writers portrayed children and themselves as outcasts. Poets and intellectuals wanted to retrieve a child-like point of view, to connect with nature and to escape from the misery of the industrial world. The long-lasting myth of the innocent child stems from the Romantic Movement.

The publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 traditionally marks the beginning of English literary romanticism. However, another landmark of Romanticism was published before that year: William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. Though not immediately successful, this work of poetry would greatly influence future authors and convey a new perspective on childhood. Blake shares many features of the Romantic Movement, but his poetry and art combine very personal views with a unique style and craft. His poetry conveys the search for a spiritual meaning, the desire to overcome sheer rationality. He had radical principles and theories, ahead of his time. He refused both rationalism and religious dogma, and believed that man should cultivate his own creativity and knowledge to worship God. Blake portrayed children in his poems as kindred spirits, who follow nature's laws and are spontaneously religious, free from rituals and doctrine.

Songs of Innocence and *Songs of Experience* complement each other and form an ensemble. The poems often present the same situation from a completely different angle. The author conveys his complex view through a dialogue between the two books. Childhood and children are central to this work; a child speaker is present in many poems, whereas other poems

describe children characters and their struggle and daily lives with deep empathy. The books encompass many aspects of life: joy and games, sorrow and fear, religion, nature and man. The registers range from the social comment of modern times, the idyllic praise of creation, the symbolic representation of man and life, the pagan-like fairy tale and the cradle song. The two books feature a character in the introduction: a child for *Songs of Innocence*, a bard for *Songs of Experience*. The child is simple, joyful, in full communion with nature and imagination; the bard bears the weight of centuries and laments the loss of a contact with Earth. The contrast between these two characters represents the different tone of the books.

Songs of Innocence contains 19 poems including the introduction. The first poems are bucolic songs praising animals and nature as peaceful metaphors of piety, and describing childhood games outside. The poem “The Little Black Boy” is a social comment, where Blake expresses compassion for the black child’s condition, and states that in Heaven he will be like the English child. That is, white. Despite the double standard, a hint of belief in social equality is present. The poem, “The Chimney Sweeper”, introduces an archetype of childhood exploitation: the little chimney sweeper. The child covered in soot stands as an image of child labour during Blake’s time. Blake depicts exploited orphans, or even children sold by their own parents, like the speaker of this poem:

When my mother died I was very young
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

[Blake 1967]

Despite their terrible lives, children have a privileged contact with the divine. Little Tom Dacre has a vision in his sleep of chimney sweepers released from their “coffins of black” – a transparent metaphor for both their work condition and short life span – and of a promised land with a green plain, a river, sun and wind. Blake is obviously referring to the first among the eight Christian

Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven”. However, the poem bitterly ends with a touch of irony:

Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm.
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

[Blake 1967]

Innocence may be a sure path to heaven, but these children can expect nothing better during their life. Blake strongly opposed the notion of piety through a life of deprivation. The progress from Bunyan’s concept of childhood is visible: children still need to be protected; however, what threatens them is not sin, but evil adults, and their soul is innocent. Here, we have an important instance of solidarity between children. The chimney sweepers comfort each other as they share the same destiny:

Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl’d like a lambs back, was shav’d, so I said,
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

[Blake 1967]

As they cannot rely on adults for assistance, they come together as a group to find solace from their miserable lives, and to protect the weakest and smallest among them. They are left to their own resources. This poem denounces society’s inability to care for these creatures.

The poems “The Little Boy Lost” and “The Little Boy Found” depict a common fear among children: losing their parents. The father is a vanishing figure who leaves the child behind:

Father, father, where are you going
O do not walk so fast.
Speak, speak to your little boy,
Or else I shall be lost,

[Blake 1967]

This authoritarian, absent father figure is opposed to the mother who embodies the caring parent, worried for the child's absence:

Who in sorrow pale, thro' the lonely dale
Her little boy weeping sought.

[Blake 1967]

An appearance of "God ever nigh" stands as a loving surrogate father and saves the child. In this book, sacred figures such as angels and God interact with human beings and show genuine affection, especially towards children.

However, in *Songs of Innocence* childhood is mostly a blessed time of play, joy and affection. Poems like "A Cradle Song" and "Nurse's Song" draw inspiration from nursery rhymes. The positive parent figure in Blake's poetry is mostly the mother. In "A Cradle Song", the mother sings her child to sleep sweetly. References to angels, doves and Jesus as a baby clearly show the author's inspiration from nursery rhymes:

Sleep sleep happy child.
All creation slept and smil'd.
Sleep sleep, happy sleep,
While o'er thee thy mother weep

Sweet babe in thy face,
Holy image I can trace.
Sweet babe once like thee,
Thy maker lay and wept for me

[Blake 1967]

The prevalence of sibilants and high vowels – the anaphora of the words 'sleep' and 'sweet' that contain both a high vowel sound and a sibilant – gives a feeling of softness to the poem.

"Nurse's Song" has a mother as the speaker again: her children are playing outside in a country landscape, and she calls them home before dusk. The poem depicts an idyllic situation:

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

“Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies.”

“No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover'd with sheep.”

“Well, well, go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed.”
The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd
And all the hills echoed.

[Blake 1967]

Children are eager to take advantage of every minute; the blessed time of childhood is short and soon adulthood will permanently end their games. Blake shows here how children choose to follow nature's rules rather than human conventions: as long as animals are still outside and there is still light in the sky, it is not time to sleep. The mother recognises and validates their bond with nature, and has a permissive role in this poem.

Songs of Experience strikes a different note. Blake reprises most of the topics of *Songs of Innocence*, but the tone is completely different. Religion in *Songs of Innocence* is praise of creation and nature; God is the child Jesus, meek and caring. *Songs of Experience* represents the Old Testament God, strict and indifferent to the destiny of men. The poem “A Garden of Love” depicts innocence lost and adult age bound by a rhetoric of deprivation and virtue:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

[Blake 1967]

Blake condemns human's interpretations of religion: the poem shows religion through grim human artefacts and clothes. The Chapel, graves and briars devastate Blake's garden, which the reader can interpret as an allegory of spirituality. The garden reminds the reader of the more joyful and natural form of religion presented in *Songs of Innocence*. In this poem, Blake complains that society made religion sorrowful and restrictive.

Nature in this book is savage and powerful. The mild and domestic representation of green pastures and lambs in *Songs of Innocence* is far away. Blake describes a wild and ancient landscape that bears pagan connotations, like in the two-part poem "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found". This poem starts with pre-Christian elements: the prophetic vision of a humanised earth waking from sleep. The protagonist Lyca – a little girl who embodies innocence and communion with nature – wanders and hears 'wild birds song'. The landscape is an immense and hostile desert, where even birds are wild. Lions and tigers are the inhabitants and they accept Lyca among them. The atmosphere reminds us of a fairy tale or a legend. Fairy tale elements are Lyca's uninterrupted sleep, and the lion who transforms into:

A spirit arm'd in gold.
On his head a crown
On his shoulders down
Flow'd his golden hair.

[Blake 1967]

Songs of Experience reprises the comment on society as well. The archetypal figure of the chimney sweeper, appears in *Songs of Experience* in a song with the same title as the one in *Songs of Innocence*: “The Chimney Sweeper”. The tone is strikingly different:

And because I am happy, & dance, & sing,
They think they have done me no injury:
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

[Blake 1967]

Blake strongly criticised society's faults again. The child will try to hold on to his childhood things, but everyone is guilty of ignoring his apparent misery. His parents that are “gone up to the church to pray” are the first to blame. In *Songs of Experience*, adults are unreliable, either indifferent or powerless, and children can only count on their own resources.

A new theme with respect to *Songs of Innocence* is nostalgia. Some poems in *Songs of Innocence* hint at the brevity of childhood, whilst the poet openly expands on the subject in *Songs of Experience*. In some of the poems, adult speakers long for their childhood. A clear example is “Nurses Song”. The poem of the same title in *Songs of Innocence* had depicted children's eagerness to exploit every hour of the day. Its counterpart in *Songs of Experience* portrays the unhappiness of a woman who regrets the passing of time. She too calls her children home, but it is not an act of affection anymore, but a bitter admonition that time passes and is lost forever:

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Your spring & your day, are wasted in play

And your winter and night in disguise.

[Blake 1967]

In both books, Blake conveys the romantic vision of the innocent child. The child is a symbol of man in the most spontaneous state. He knows and accepts joy and sorrow because of an innate bond with nature and the spiritual dimension. Society is responsible for children's suffering, since authorities mistreat them, and their own family often neglects and exploits them. The poet empathises with the child, because he feels like an outcast in the same way. This approach contributes to define the child as something different from an adult in the making. The child is complete in itself, and even superior in some way, but is very fragile and needs protection in order to grow and thrive in his natural creativity and individuality.

2.3. NONSENSE, HUMOUR AND REBELLION: EDWARD LEAR

Nonsense and humour have a long-lasting tradition in all literature. This kind of writing can take many forms, and it often expresses rebellion towards society. Comic poetry is very popular with children, because it often employs funny sounds and wordplay. Comic poetry is varied, and can be playful and cheerful, but also very grim. Nonsense verse is another important form of humour. It usually resorts to very literal wordplay to portray the reversal of daily life; it amuses young readers and sometimes creates a sense of uneasiness for adults, and it can be very macabre. Nonsense has always been steadily present in both verse and prose for children. For instance, nonsense is a very important element of nursery rhymes or playground rhymes. Children are very sensitive to sound and rhythm, even when they are too young to understand the words or when words have no logical sense.

The most famous authors of nonsense poetry are without a doubt Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, “two bachelor writers who had little in common except an elfin lightness and a love of other people's children”, as Peter Hunt puts it [Hunt, 2004].

Edward Lear was mainly an artist. He sketched animals and plants; among his first clients was the Earl of Derby. When Lear's *Book of Nonsense* became widely popular, many believed the Earl of Derby to be the true author. Lear began writing and illustrating comic verse during his adolescence to amuse the children of his sister and friends. His first and most famous books were collections of limericks, but he would later try his hands at longer and more complex forms. When he moved to Knowsley Hall under the invitation of the Earl of Derby, he amused the children of the household with illustrated comic poems. The collection of limericks *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen* inspired his first book of limericks.

The limerick form is composed of five verses; the first, second and fifth are usually longer, and the rhyme scheme is a strict ABBAA. The first line typically introduces a person and ends with the name of a place, often very exotic or unusual. In its folkloristic forms, the content was typically transgressive or

obscene. Edward Lear popularized the limerick form, introducing changes and adapting it to his personality and context. He mostly wrote for children and for high social classes, and his content is not obscene. However, he retains a form of physical and even gruesome humour that appeals to children; his characters often meet with awful endings and have funny physical features and strange behaviours. The form of Lear's limericks was different from the traditional; the presence of illustrations could change the number of lines in publication, and Lear usually used the same word at the end of the first and last verse, instead of the rhyme.

Lear published his first volume of limericks, *A Book of Nonsense*, in 1846; it immediately became widely popular and was reprinted very soon. *Nonsense Songs and Stories*, published 25 years later, was his second collection of poems. It contained what would later become his most famous poem: "The Owl and the Pussycat". During his career, he experimented with different forms of writing: limericks, songs, alphabets in verse, nonsense stories. His experience as an illustrator inspired his volumes of nonsense botany, where plants blend with animals and objects. He also illustrated his books of poetry and stories with hilarious, excessive drawings.

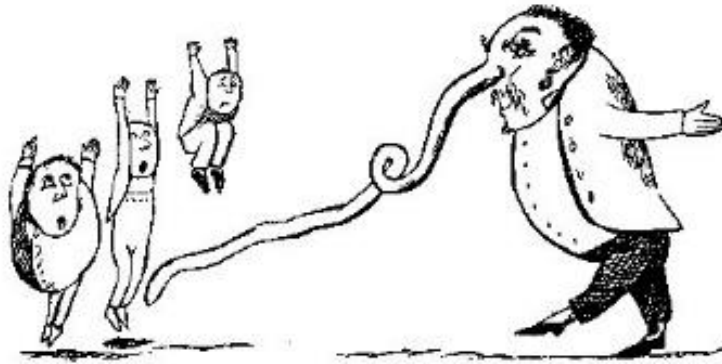
A Book of Nonsense made Edward Lear famous as a poet in 1846, and established the limerick form in children's poetry. It was a collection of 72 limericks illustrated by the author himself. Lear's limericks depict absurd situations, and are for the most part light-hearted and not vulgar. Many characters of his limericks meet with tragic ends, but the tone is light and there is no feeling of tragedy. There are no real recurring topics: each poem portrays a funny character. The reader can distinguish two groups: characters with strange physical features, and characters with strange behaviours. The purpose is to make children laugh as the writer states in the opening lines:

There was an old Derry down Derry, who loved to see little folks
merry;
So he wrote them a Book, and with laughter they shook
At the fun of that Derry down Derry.

[Lear, 2014]

This introduction does not follow the classical form of the limerick, with five lines, even though it reproduces it in sounds and capitalization. The first edition of Lear's limericks had a variable number of lines.

The opening limerick belongs to the group that introduces characters with strange physical features: in this case, an old man with a long nose.



There was an Old Man with a nose,
Who said, "If you choose to suppose
That my nose is too long, you are certainly wrong!"
That remarkable Man with a nose.

[Lear, 2014]

The character's comment implies that his nose is long, but the limerick does not explicitly affirm it. In this case, the author's illustration confirms and integrates the words. His exaggerated unrealistic features emphasize the funny nonsensical situation. Children certainly enjoy this kind of illustration and laugh at the character's bizarre appearance.

"There was an Old Person of Philœ" represents the other group of limericks:

There was an Old Person of Philœ,
Whose conduct was scroobious and wily;
He rushed up a Palm when the weather was calm,
And observed all the ruins of Philœ.

[Lear, 2014]

A typical feature of limericks are the names of places in the first line; Lear often mentions exotic or far places that are very appealing to children's imagination.

Most of the limericks in this book display a rather innocent humour; the author does not show any meanness, all the while depicting ridiculous characters and situations. The characters are usually adults, most of them presented as 'Old Man' or 'Old Woman'; children always make fun of adults' strange habits and features, and Lear indulges in this pleasure with them. Like Carroll, Lear had a complicated relationship with society, and felt more at ease with children. They always enjoyed his company and he had a far less complex relationship with them than Carroll. He wrote most of his books for children of his friends and relatives.

In some poems, Lear presents gruesome and unlikely situations, often deadly. One example can be "There Was an Old Man of Peru":



There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who watched his wife making a stew;
But once, by mistake, in a stove she did bake
That unfortunate Man of Peru.

[Lear, 2014]

The illustration relieves the apparently tragic situation, making it funny, albeit macabre. Black humour often appeals to the taste of children.

In other poems, strange and tragic misfortunes trigger unlikelier solutions, like in "There Was an Old Man of Nepal":



There was an Old Man of Nepaul,
From his horse had a terrible fall;
But, though split quite in two, with some very strong glue
They mended that man of Nepaul.

[Lear, 2014]

The second collection of Lear's poetry was published in 1871, and was composed of different kinds of texts. Lear wrote songs, stories and an imaginary, nonsensical atlas of botany.

Among the songs is "The Owl and the Pussycat". Humanised animals are a new element in Lear's poetry, absent from his previous limerick collection. Another new feature is the linear narration. The main nonsensical elements are the peculiar romance between the two animals, and a few invented words with evocative sounds:

They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the bong-tree grows;
[...]
They dined on mince and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;

[Lear, 2014]

The "land where the bong-tree grows" certainly conveys that sense of somewhere far and exotic familiar to Lear's production, and the seemingly casual insertion of unreal objects surprises the reader. The poem's nonsense quality does not give feelings of uneasiness. There is such a carefree adventurous atmosphere that any reader would be willing to accept bong-trees, runcible spoons and an interspecies wedding officiated by a turkey.

Scattering nonsensical elements in a linear narration such as this shows a strong control over the words and the process of writing. Nonsense plays on a difficult suspension of disbelief, and it is easy for the whole ensemble to become utterly silly. If we can adopt Carpenter and Pritchard's definition that "Lear's [and Carroll's] nonsense is a sequence of ideas which progresses logically once an initial premise has been accepted" [Carpenter and Pritchard 1999: 380], then it is an exercise of control over an apparent chaos of impossible situations and distorted reality.

Lear shows a deep understanding of what appeals to children and what amuses them, and he obviously takes great pleasure in writing for them. They are more his audience than they were Bunyan's or Blake's, because he truly puts himself at their level. Whilst Bunyan wanted to save them and Blake wanted to protect them, Lear is happy playing with them in their own way.

2.4. THE 20TH CENTURY: ALAN ALEXANDER MILNE

By the start of the 20th century, poetry for children comprised many genres. Children had a great variety of verse at their disposal, and the tones ranged from comic to precious and sentimental; poems could be both educational and funny. Nevertheless, the romantic vision of the innocent child, the idyllic scenery and the educational purpose still dominated poetry for children. The landscape is mostly heritage of the last century: white, middle-class children live in gardens and interact with parents and nannies. Social comments have disappeared, as well as any trace of harsh realities such as poverty. Children in these poems are mostly concerned with play, the brief time of childhood and interactions with the few adults around them. They can feel solitude and create imaginary friends to keep them company; they often live imaginary adventures in faraway places. Harsh realities and social problems are completely absent, the nursery is a closed, idyllic world, and adults carefully keep them under control.

A commonplace theme during this period is nostalgia, probably related to the tormented history of this first half of the century. Many of the most famous poets of this time express deep regret for their own happy childhood; nostalgia sometimes becomes more important and poignant than communicating with real children. Perhaps their longing for childhood as a simpler, happier time of life reflects the difficulty for their generation to recover from the traumas of both world wars. After such tragedies, life cannot be simple, and the world is different. Authors retract to an idyllic image of what they lost, as a reaction to a reality they refuse. In this perspective, we can see similar traits to romantic poetry, but idyllic daily life replaces the mystical traits frequent in romantic poems.

Among the most important authors is Alan Alexander Milne. He has always been a widely successful, if a bit controversial, writer. Both his prose and his poetry are still very famous, and he created characters whose popularity is still lasting several generations after. He was a prolific writer of many genres. His relationship with childhood was rather complex according to his son, the

Christopher Robin who inspired the character of many of his books. He appeared as a nostalgic adult who was unsure as to how to interact with real children. However, his poetry is not gloomy, despite the sentimental tone and the conventional middle-class setting. According to Morag Styles, “one of the reasons his poetry has lasted the test of time is because of Milne's sure command of metre and rhyme, a sense of humour and verses that sing” (Styles 1998: 263).

Milne's two collections, *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* appeared in 1924 and 1927; both critics and the public were delighted. The poems showed a wide range of themes and situations. The most frequent settings are countryside landscapes, and indoors, although a few sugar coated urban settings are present too. Themes and style of writing are similar. Milne describes children games, a relationship with adults that can be both affectionate and frustrating. He often describes imaginary friends and games and other distractions typical of lonely children. Groups of children or friends playing together are absent; when Milne portrays groups of friends, they are always animals behaving like humans. A few poems portray a girl and a boy that imitate adults, playing house. Siblings are also completely absent.

Animals are very important in these two books, and enjoy a huge variety of representations. They can be pets, imaginary friends or even imaginary enemies, and take part in the child's games. The same animal can be portrayed in different ways. The bear is an important example. There are many bears in Milne's poetry, and one among them has become very famous: Winnie the Pooh. He appears more than once in *Now We Are Six*. His first appearance is the preface; this hint at a famous character interacting with the book makes him more real:

P. S. – Pooh wants us to say that he thought it was a different book; and he hopes you won't mind, but he walked through it one day, looking for his friend Piglet, and sat down on some of the pages by mistake.

[Milne, 2011]

Pooh makes many appearances as an imaginary friend who always supports the child in his adventures and games:

‘Let’s frighten the dragons,’ I said to Pooh.
‘That’s right,’ said Pooh to Me.
‘I’m not afraid,’ I said to Pooh,
And I held his paw and shouted ‘Shoo!
Silly old dragons!’ – and off they flew.
‘I wasn’t afraid,’ said Pooh, said he,
‘I’m never afraid with you.’

[Milne, 2011]

Bears also appear as anthropomorphic animals, like the two siblings in “Twice Times” from *Now We Are Six*. They are one of the very few representations of siblings in the poems, and they immediately show a main difference between them: one is good and one is bad. However, this difference can be flexible, because the two bears shift places during the poem. Despite the criticism to the author for his idealisation of childhood, the children he depicts are never completely good or completely bad; they tend to be self-sufficient beings, and can be mischievous, whimsical, happy, sweet or sad. Therefore, they are more realistic than they may seem. The two bears of this poem are a proof of that:

There may be a Moral, though some say not;
I think there’s a moral, though I don’t know what.
But if one gets better, as the other gets wuss,
These Two Little Bears are just like Us.
For Christopher remembers up to Twice Times Ten ...
But I keep forgetting where I’ve put my pen.*

[Milne, 2011]

The moral at the end explains the metaphor and, just like the preface of *Now We Are Six*, adds something that breaks the wall between the author and the reader. The asterisk refers to a note at the end of the book, stating “*So I have had to write this one in pencil.” [Milne 2011] The author catches the reader’s attention with these tricks, as the poems come out of the page.

Other bears can be more menacing, like the ones in the poem “Lines and Squares” from *When We Were Very Young*. Here Milne tackles some of the irrational fears of children, and shows how they often add colourful images to their sensations. They create precise rituals, rich in details. More important, the child is not afraid and does not look for protection. The child is defiant and self-confident, and he turns his daily walk into an adventure:

And I say to them, ‘Bears,
Just look how I’m walking in all of the squares!’

[Milne, 2011]

This tone is prevalent in poems that depict children alone. These children do not really need adults to protect or guide them. They tend to rebel against adults’ rules and conventions, like Jane in “The Good Little Girl” from *Now We Are Six*:

Well, what did they think that I went there to do?
And why should I want to be bad at the Zoo?
And should I be likely to say if I had?
So that’s why it’s funny of Mummy and Dad,
This asking and asking, in case I was bad,
‘Well? Have you been a good girl, Jane?’

[Milne, 2011]

Both boys and girls share this attitude, and Milne shows respect towards children; he attributes to them pragmatism and intelligence.

However, these children are not always nice; they throw tantrums and make their parents worry, or even disappear. In the poem “Disobedience” from *When We Were Very Young*, the roles appear reversed, and a child gives orders to his mother:

James James
Said to his Mother,
Mother,’ he said, said he;
You must never go down to the end of the town,
if you don’t go down with me.’

[Milne, 2011]

His mother disobeys and her punishment is disappearance. The poem parodies the cautionary tales of disobedient children that displayed disproportionate punishments. It is funny and a bit disturbing for adult readers who identify with the mother. The poem surely appeals very much to his intended audience of children, amused by the change of perspective.

According to Milne, children can be very demanding, even when they do not dominate adults: he often portrays isolated children who blame busy adults for their loneliness. Adults cannot understand the child's world and become a source of frustration. Despite that, children display obvious affection and need of attention, like in the poem "Come out with me" from *Now We Are Six*:

But every one says, 'Run along!'
(Run along, run along!)
All of them say, 'Yes, dear,' and never notice me.
Every one says, 'Run along,
There's a little darling!'
If I'm a little darling, why won't they come and see?

[Milne, 2011]

Milne sympathises with children's solitude, and shows the resources of their imagination. Children can invent all sorts of stories and games and imaginary friends, but these poems always retain a feeling of sadness. Children's feelings for the adult world are ambiguous: they are aware of the richness of their imagination and they clearly enjoy the freedom of not having a defined life with precise duties. However, there still lingers an unsatisfied wish to share their time with their family. Sometimes they want and imagine solitude, and complete freedom, like in the poem "The Island" from *When We Were Very Young*:

And there would I rest, and lie,
My chin in my hands, and gaze
At the dazzle of sand below,
And the green waves curling slow,

And the grey-blue distant haze
Where the sea goes up to the sky ...

And I'd say to myself as I looked so lazily down at the sea: 'There's
nobody else in the world, and the world was made
for me.'

[Milne, 2011]

The child speaker here triumphantly affirms his importance over the rest of the world.

Milne faithfully depicts certain aspects of a child's character. The situations and places are often embellished, sometimes unrealistic and far too nice. He exhibits a paternalistic tone in his prefaces and in poems when he tries too hard to imitate a childlike language. Despite that, his children can be realistic in their complex individuality and sometimes selfishness. They can be realistic in their games and imaginary friends and stories, and in their frustration interacting with adults. The setting may still be largely romantic, but the children themselves are already very different from their romantic counterparts.

2.5. CHILDREN'S POETRY TODAY

Poetry nowadays is more varied than it has ever been, as it acknowledges the variety of its potential audience. The introduction of Fiona Sampson's *Beyond the Lyric – A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* talks of an “extraordinary cultural blossoming” [Sampson 2012: 2]. This rich landscape mirrors the multicultural, multi-layered society to which poets belong; audiences are more interested in a poetry that is in touch with their lives. This abundance of styles and voices can puzzle both critics and readers. These changes and variety took poetry outside of narrow intellectual circles. The increasing influence of women poets, of authors coming from postcolonial countries, of “working-class poets”, create poetry for children who gives voice to issues long neglected.

This change in the field of children's poetry started during the second half of the 20th century; readers received it with joy and relief, whereas many critics were dismissive and sceptical. The new school of poetry was named “urchin verse”. The first collection of the kind was *Mind Your Own Business* by Michael Rosen, and came out in 1974. This kind of poetry tackled children's daily life with a mostly comical tone, but did not flinch in front of serious issues. The conventional idyllic settings and situations disappeared.

Contemporary children's poetry bears all the appearance of a break from the tradition. However, its richness and variety comes from a smart blend of elements from tradition that contemporary poets combined with new and fresh topics. The educational purpose that was dominant in the first instances of children's poetry is still present nowadays. Most poets disguise it under a playful appearance, whereas others, such as John Agard, openly write educational poetry. The perspective of authors on children reminds us of both Puritan and Romantic poetry: the child needs protection and affection and is still the symbol of an unbiased point of view on the world; however, it is responsible for itself and has an active role in his choices. The social commentary found in Blake is a topic very much present in contemporary children's poetry, especially on issues such as the protection of the

environment. Contemporary authors intertwine such important and challenging topics with lighter, playful verse. Like Lear, many contemporary children's poets often turn to nonsense poetry and wordplay; Michael Rosen is a remarkable example of a poetry who combines serious themes and lightness. However, contemporary children's poetry also focuses on children's feelings and daily life, and often depicts the same issues and situations that were so relevant to Milne's production. The bucolic atmosphere might be gone, but children's games, imagination and complex relationship with adults are still there. Contemporary poets are knowledgeable of poetical tradition; an author like Agard often openly takes inspiration from it. They took the best and most adaptable features of all poetry and created unique and remarkable writing, powerful and approachable.

Moreover, children's poetry has an active role in children's education again; the most famous poets laureate are holding workshops in schools. Children are learning from them to love poetry from a very young age. Children's poetry today is probably nearer to its audience than it has ever been.

3. FOCUS ON FOUR CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS

During the second half of the 20th century, poetry for children contributed to an important cultural shift, aiming at more inclusion of less favoured social classes and ethnic groups. The historical evolution towards children's empowerment and independence in children's poetry, reaches its peak with contemporary poetry. Contemporary authors trust children, because they see contemporary society and their generation as a failure.

Which issues concern these authors the most? The environment, poverty, the evolution of family, and bullying are among the most frequent topics. Poets thoroughly analyse the side effects of our multicultural society, such as racism, the struggle to build one's identity. Contemporary authors embed these issues in representations of children's daily life. This smart mix captivates children's attention, and dominates part of children's poetry. Poets often employ a light-hearted tone that makes such topics less intimidating for young readers. Authors share their ideas and principles through poetry, and trust children with a legacy of egalitarian and environmentalist values. How do they transmit these values and what is the role of their past and culture? How are they able to portray and address real children and meet an educational purpose?

To find answers, I will take into account four important authors: Michael Rosen, Grace Nichols, John Agard and Jackie Kay.

3.1. OVERVIEW OF THE AUTHORS

Michael Rosen is the man that shook the world of children's poetry with his first collection *Mind Your Own Business* in 1974. Despite its success, at first critics rejected his poetry on the ground that the subjects were unimportant and the writing too colloquial. Michael Rosen is a prolific author, whose production is highly recognizable. His work is a milestone of children's poetry; his style and themes never changed much throughout his career. Forty years after the publication of his first book, his inspiration and his will to communicate with young generations remain intact.

Michael Rosen began writing poetry at a very young age. He grew up in a family of educators: his parents' broad views on education probably inspired him to approach poetry without fear and reverence. He was appointed Children's laureate in 2007. His work influenced young people in many ways. He has held many workshops with children and teachers to encourage an active and experimental perspective on poetry. He highlighted the importance of children's everyday life in his poetry: in the inside front cover of his anthology *Michael Rosen's A-Z: The best children's poetry from Agard to Zephaniah* he wrote that "his poems are about all kinds of things – but always important things – from chocolate cake to bath time." [Rosen 2009]

He was the first of his generation to grant all power to children. This is very clear in the series of poems he dedicates to the toddler Eddie and his shenanigans; his parents seem unable to contain his vitality and talent for trouble. According to Rosen, the character Eddie became a favourite among children in schools. In his poetry, the evolution towards a separation between the world of adults and the world of children is complete. Children follow their own rules. Parents give up their authority and choose dialogue. This sense of freedom, source of the lively atmosphere in Rosen's poetry, will develop into a feeling of confusion in the production of other authors.

Grace Nichols is a landmark voice in the group of Caribbean poets. Among contemporary poets, these authors form a group of its own. A multicultural identity is at the heart of their production. Grace Nichols came to England in

1977; she was one of the first. Her books explore the complexities of multicultural identity, with a playful, yet profound voice. She became very famous with her very first collections and she won several awards. With her husband and fellow poet John Agard, she edited many anthologies of Caribbean poetry, giving exposure to many other voices. She published her first collection in 1983, titled *I Is a Long-Memored Woman*, and she won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. She has been widely appreciated by both critics and the audience from the beginning, and she is still famous. She has worked with children in schools and held poetry workshops.

In her poems, she tackles issues such as acceptance and racism, and the development of children's identity. She also tells traditional tales and depicts landscapes of her native Guyana. Her poetry has a distinctive flavour, rich in music and sounds. She often writes in a language part English part Creole. The tone is usually cheerful and sweet; her language shows a deep affection for children and often filters dramatic situations. Her production attempts to establish a middle ground; she provides children with guiding principles and ideas. She tries to lead children to embrace their own identity. Her view on children tends to be overtly positive, and she is probably the most prone to idealization within the authors' selection. Along with John Agard, she tries to transmit to children their Caribbean culture, and guide them to discover their own roots. Her poems convey a magic feeling, and her tender tone enhances the grace and power of her writing.

Jackie Kay is a versatile poet and writer, whose production includes prose and poetry for adults, young adults and children alike. She has won many prizes for her work; she also takes part in theatrical projects and is currently a professor at Newcastle University. Jackie Kay has a heterogeneous identity: born in 1961 from a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father, she was adopted by a Scottish couple.

Much of her production focuses on the search for identity and the feeling of being different from others. Homosexuality and bullies are among her main topics as well. Some of Jackie Kay's production appears to be addressed to adolescents rather than children. In my selection of authors, she is the most

explicit in her use of language and the situations portrayed. Even when portraying fictitious situations, she can be very realistic. She refuses to sugar-coat reality for her audience; the children she portrays are often angry and confused. They struggle to understand themselves and the world, and adults struggle to deal with them. She stands out because of the blunt honesty of her descriptions, and because of her scarce use of humour. Some of her poetry can be light-hearted and funny, but its core is complex. Her characters often engage in frank and eloquent dialogues. However, her poems are never cynical, as she always shows concern and care for her audience. Among her main collections are *Two's Company* and *Three Has Gone*, whose recurring character is a girl with her personality split in two: Jackie Kay often uses metaphors to convey feelings and describe situations. Her characters, both children and adults, are never completely positive. Whilst this is a trait of most contemporary children's poetry, it is most apparent in her production. In her poems, children can be more violent, and adults can be more powerless or neglectful. She tackles harsh subjects with powerful verse and strong expressions.

John Agard belongs to the group of Caribbean writers, like Grace Nichols. He is a skilled writer and an electrifying performer. His poems touch on issues such as education, integration and growth with delicate and vibrant humour. He has been a constant presence in schools, where he held poetry workshops with children. He is knowledgeable of his young audience. He is native from Guyana, like his associate and wife Grace Nichols. They moved to England from Guyana together in 1977, and he worked for the Commonwealth Institute and the BBC. He won numerous awards for his poetry.

Among his works for children are many witty educational books such as *Einstein, the girl who hated maths* and *Hello H2O*. Other books focus on animals and the environment, or stories and culture from the Caribbean. An interesting experiment is his modern transposition of Dante's *Inferno*, titled *The young Inferno*, a brief and entertaining way to introduce children to a classic of literature. Other books, such as *Goldilocks on CCTV* apply literary tradition to modern life with funny results. His verse is very free, and musical,

and recalls some contemporary music genres. Among these authors, he is the most interested in finding playful way to educate his audience. His educational books cover subjects that are usually not very appealing for children, such as maths and physics, whereas his books on animals strike a strong environmentalist note. John Agard's humorous and witty approach to these subjects has certainly made him a favourite among children.

Each author has a different perspective on poetry and my analysis focuses on some key elements: their relationship with readers and characters; the subjects they choose and the landscape they create; form and style.

Children are the main characters and recipients of this poetry. How do these authors portray children as characters? How do they address children as readers? The first common trait children characters share is intelligence. These poets portray children who are smart and uncompromising. They struggle with school and discipline, but they outwit adults on many levels. Another important element is independence: children make plans and take action. These authors often address children directly: their tone can be playful, serious, caring, educational, but they always show respect for their audience. They encourage readers to challenge definitions and constraints imposed by society and to conquer their own insecurities. Some authors are especially thoughtful towards children that have different traits – especially ethnic and physical. Children are empowered as both characters and readers. These poets invite readers to speak for themselves. They were among the first authors to hold poetry workshops in schools, giving back to children their own poetic voice.

This generation of poets became famous because of their tendency to portray scenes of everyday life with little to no filters. They can amuse children and raise their awareness on contemporary issues. They choose subjects like the evolution of families, the relationship between humanity and the environment, and the importance of roots in a multicultural society. Female poets also explore the issue of gender roles, often in poems about sport. Sport and games are a means of expression of the child's own energy, a way to

overcome social obstacles, or to overturn prejudice. The recent anthology of Caribbean children's poetry *Give the Ball to the Poet* [2014] dedicates a whole section to sport.

The landscape is often at the very core of children's poetry, and a topic in its own right. Jackie Kay and Grace Nichols especially have a great talent for descriptions that bring places alive. Urban atmosphere is typical of Michael Rosen's poems, even though his character often wanders in the countryside; he depicts every scenery through the eyes of children. John Agard, like Grace Nichols, sets many poems in their native Guyana; he often creates vivid imaginary landscapes.

Each author employs a personal style of writing; however, they share some features. A preference for the free verse and a creative use of rhymes dominates most of their poetry. These authors love to play with poetry: they are keen on wordplay and on graphic effects. Poems can jump from the page, and follow the shape of an object or an animal. There is a great variety of figures of speech. The length of poems and lines and the use of rhymes always change too. Poets play with language itself: they often experiment with the use of dialect, creole or slang in their poems. They take inspiration from playground rhymes and create nonsense wordplay. These authors often imitate musical genres such as rap. Their poems bear a musical quality that captivates children.

3.2. MICHAEL ROSEN

Since his first book came out, the work of Michael Rosen was praised as a “real book of poems for modern children” [Hunt 2004]. The romantic vision of the child disappears completely. He does not portray children as abstract entities, but as well- rounded characters. Within this selection, he is the one who chooses children as main characters most frequently. Rosen idealises his characters; however, his ideal is not a romantic child, but an engaging and funny little rascal. The child as an individual is at the centre of his poetry. He partly takes inspiration from his own childhood and includes his own children as characters, too. The autobiographical material contributes to the feeling of authenticity in his writing. However, Rosen’s production is all but nostalgic; save rare exceptions, he uses the present tense when he narrates memories of his own childhood.

The identity of his characters is in the making: he portrays children as very curious and active. They crave new experiences and discoveries; they are never tired of exploring or inventing games. Rosen celebrates children’s creativity, especially when it comes to adventures and games. They are insatiably curious about the world and life. Adults are often out of their depth when facing their endless stream of questions, as in the funny poem “Who? Why? Where? What?” from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007]:

What was the first egg in the world?
I don’t know.
Where was I before I was born?
You were – er you weren’t – er –
If I could turn my head round and round
could I walk backwards looking forwards?
Could you stop asking me questions?
[Rosen 2007]

Another feature of Rosen’s characters is their strong, albeit oblivious and innocent, individualism. Out of sheer curiosity, these children unwittingly question any authority, be it parents, teachers, or peers. This tension between

the child and others is especially present when the poem narrates anecdotes of Rosen's childhood. The author's view and life experiences are familiar to all children that struggle to build their own identity and to understand society; that is, all children. In Rosen's poetry, children become more vocal than ever about their frustration over social conventions. Such conventions mostly take the form of silly rules by adults or short quarrels among children.

Rosen's characters seem to enjoy spending time alone. That can happen at any moment of the day, although bedtime and bath time are the most frequent contexts. "The bathroom fiddler" from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007], who stands and dreams "sucking on the sponge" [Rosen 2007] and "The lone survivor" from *Centrally heated knickers* [2000], who goes "deep-sea diving/looking for old shipwrecks" [Rosen 2000] in the bath are two examples. This kind of bath fantasy is recurring in Rosen. Children's imagination seems to flourish in solitude; they relish the chance to be themselves. Parents urge them to come down to earth and other children lead them to codified group games and situations. The external world hinders and limits children's hopes and dreams, and they have to hide to express themselves freely. For instance, "My magic box" from *Quick, let's get out of here* [1983] shows a child who lives adventures and travels thanks to:

a shiny black box
like a cassette recorder
with silver levers and buttons
and switches
and little flaps that clipped
down
with silver studs.

[Rosen 1983]

People around always interrupt his dreams with this modern version of Aladdin's lamp. Despite the light tone, the conflict between the external world and the child's inner fantasies is clear and a hint of regret pervades the end of the poem, which is rare in Rosen:

It was a good friend,
my box,
kept me out of trouble
my box
stayed with me when I was ill
my box.

[Rosen 1983]

However, solitude and imagination can become children's worst enemies. The child in "The longest journey in the world" from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007] has to walk through his room in the dark to reach the bed. His brother is already safe in his own bed, so the child is completely alone, and the room takes on a frightening appearance:

There is nowhere so full of dangerous things
Things that love dark places,
Things that breathe only when you breathe
And hold their breath when I hold mine.
So I have to say:
"I'm not scared."

[Rosen 2007]

For these intensely active children, the time they spend alone is a time for introspection. Rosen's poems portraying children alone show their thoughts and feelings. An example is "Night rides" from *Centrally heated knickers* [2000]:

Night Rides ...
[...]
... and I think of my big sister
far away
and I want to ride that bus
all the way
up to her block of flats
up the stairs
and in through her door.

[Rosen 2000]

These moments of introspection are an exception. Michael Rosen's children characters are usually busy planning games and getting into trouble. The outcomes of their adventures are often comical for children and usually uncomfortable for adults. Rarely do their errors have bad consequences, apart from making parents angry or worried. They seldom apologise when they make mistakes or get into trouble; threats of punishment by adults do not intimidate them. The reader can almost see them shrug; a good example is the child who eats a whole chocolate cake during the night in the poem "Chocolate cake" from *Quick, let's get out of here* [1983]:

well what could she say?
'That's the last time I give you any cake to take
to school.
Now go. Get out no wait
not before you've washed your dirty sticky face.' [...]
Maybe she'll forget about it by next week.

[Rosen 1983]

They are not stereotypical "good" children and have a taste for pleasures like games, daydreaming or tasty food. Rosen pampers his characters, capturing small moments of childhood: his poems are pictures. Overall, these children still feel safe. They have their own world, their own independence and personality. They might be afraid of the dark and annoyed by norms, but the playful voice and practical attitude tone down most negative feelings.

Michael Rosen stages most of his poems in common and recognizable urban settings: the house, the school, city streets and playgrounds. Rosen's poetry is mostly of action and focuses on characters. The landscape is in the background. The setting can be mentioned within the action, and is always seen through the eyes of the children characters. Children often play with the environment around them and use it to build stories and imaginary situations. An example is "Down the road" from *Mind your own business* [1996]:

We're listening to Niagara in the drains
and camping in Cape Horn under the butcher's
awning.

We change guard at the tobacconist
watch petrol rainbow in the gutter.

[Rosen 1996]

Their imagination creates an evocative atmosphere for this otherwise ordinary background. Some of Rosen's poems set in this urban environment show once again how much he cherishes children's inventive spirit and imagination. Children can make the landscape magical, like in another poem from *Mind your own business* [1996]:

I saw a lady with red hair
talking to one with blue on

the sun shone
and the rain ran
the streets emptied
the people had gone

when I looked
for the ladies again
there was a purple stream
flowing down the drain

[Rosen 1996]

Even though a connection between the two women and the purple stream is very unlikely, the mere hint makes the scene intriguing for a child reader. A few elements are enough to sketch a vivid urban scene: the alliteration in 'sun shone' and 'rain ran' gives a funny musical effect. The streets that empty all of a sudden create a surreal scene, like a spell.

Rosen's characters are usually thrilled when they find themselves in a different setting like the countryside, a wood, or the sea. They become even more active troublemakers than usual. They embark on exciting adventures

with their peers, to the dismay of adults. This happens in poems like “Trousers down” from *You wait till I’m older than you* [1997]:

What have we done?
We’ve brought up two completely crazy children.
They go out, they climb a mountain,
they walk fifteen miles,
they read maps
they carry their own food and drink
they show themselves to be really capable,
responsible boys
and then what do they do?
They walk all over the countryside
with their trousers down.

[Rosen 1997]

The poem tells an anecdote from the author’s childhood, but it probably strikes a note with many readers too. As the father character points out, the two children are capable and independent, but their resourcefulness and creativity has a mischievous, irreverent side. However, this kind of fun is mostly harmless. Children characters in Rosen’s writing seem to enjoy the chance of being outside the city, and take fully advantage of the outdoors for their fun.

However, the landscape can become something more than a background and instrument for children. In his collection *Centrally Heated Knickers* [2000], Rosen expresses his concerns about the state of the environment. He explores the issue from many points of view, with irony and some sadness. Children seem to have more common sense than adults do, mainly because they do not share their greed and do not give priority to financial reasons. This attitude towards children is frequent among these authors. Rosen’s collection criticizes and parodies the hypocrisy of society’s vision about saving the environment. Children characters highlight the contradiction between adults’ words and actions through advertisement in the poem “Save it”:

When we’re in school

they say to us
we should do all we can
to save energy:
use less electricity petrol and gas;
use less water.

I don't know why
they keep telling us!
They ought to tell
all those people
in the ads for
cars, cookers, petrol, washing machines
and stuff ...

[Rosen 2000]

In Rosen's poetry, children characters only have a vague idea of environment issues, but they already know that adults are to blame. Rosen is unusually pessimistic in his poems about the environment. He foreshadows a cold future without any source of energy, or a complete extinction of humanity, buried under an unbearable amount of rubbish:

It was a cold day tomorrow
when we discovered
there was no more wood
no more coal
no more oil
and no more gas
Tomorrow was a cold day.
["Cold Tomorrow", Rosen 2000]

For, rubbish they made
more and more
till the world it filled
from shore to shore.
[...]
It stank and stank so much
I thinked
they in the end
became ex-stinked.'
["How Humans Out-died", Rosen
2000]

Michael Rosen has a playful and versatile style, and he can go from very short wordplay to narrative poems several pages long. His poetry displays a free and irregular structure that changes in every piece of writing. However, it is possible to identify a few favourites: long poems where he tells daily life anecdotes or events of his own childhood; shorter sound poems focused on wordplay and nonsense or riddles. Rosen uses free verse, and the rhythm varies greatly across poems: nonsense verse tends to be fast-paced with a lively beat that recalls playground rhymes. An example is “Something’s drastic” from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007]:

Something’s drastic
My nose is made of plastic
Something’s drastic
My ears are elastic
Something’s drastic
Something’s drastic
I’m fantastic!

[Rosen 2007]

The author tends to use longer lines for narratives, which have the structure of dialogues and prose. As Rosen writes in the preface of *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007]: “I call this ‘talking on to the page with my pen’. [...] I believe the page is a good place to put these memories, scenes, dreams and fragments” [Rosen 2007].

His preferences represent his relationship with his young audience: topics and structures are familiar to children and awaken their interest. His tone and style are informal, as he does not want to create a distance between his production and children. Instead, he writes poems that can be as close as possible to children’s experience and perception. Rosen creates musical effects with rhetorical features such as rhyme, the use of onomatopoeia, enjambments and refrains. Even in dialogues and narratives, he often uses rhymes to simplify the reading process. The anaphora is among his favourite rhetorical devices and contributes to create musical effects. One instance of such use is “Eddie and the car” from *You wait till I’m older than you* [1997]:

We stop, we get out, we spread the sheet
we unload the boxes and bags and bottles
we sit down and it's
sniff
sniff
sniff
what's that?
what on earth could smell like that?
a dead dog?
OK EVERYONE BACK IN THE CAR.

Drive on.

We stop, we get out, we spread the sheet
we unload the boxes and bags and bottles
we sit down and it's
ZZZZZZZ
ZZZZZZZ
ZZZZZZZ
wasps.
Hundreds of them.
OK EVERYONE BACK IN THE CAR.

Drive on.

[Rosen 1997]

Here, the first three lines and the last two are repeated in every stanza. The effect mirrors the use of formulas for memory purpose in classic poetic genres of oral tradition, such as epic poems. The anaphora also includes an onomatopoeia repeated three times in the middle of the stanza. The event is repeated, but the cause is different each time. Refrains between stanzas or in other unusual positions make the poem sound like a song.

This example shows another instance of anaphora in the final lines of the poem "Don't" from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007]:

Don't throw fruit at a computer.
Don't what?
Don't throw fruit at a computer.
Don't what?
Don't throw fruit at a computer.
Who do they think I am?
Some kind of fool?

[Rosen 2007]

In this case, the anaphora emphasises the child's bewilderment at parents' recommendations. The two final questions confirm the feeling of puzzlement that certainly resonates with many readers. Rosen frequently makes fun of adults' rules and orders in his poems.

The verse scheme provides further graphic effects and influences the tone. Rosen often intertwines long lines with very short ones and uses effects like enjambments or rapid successions of minimal lines. An example is the poem "Nightmare" from *Mustard, custard, grumble belly and gravy* [2007]:

Look
See
Me
The train
Platform
Me
The train
Near now
Nearer now
Nearer and nearer now
NOW

That's all.

[Rosen 2007]

In this case, the acceleration symbolises a fast heartbeat and panic; the last line interrupts the nightmare and awakens the character – and possibly the

reader. The short lines imitate the form of the platform and the train and its fast speed. The last lines gradually become longer: the reader can see in these lines the train that appears bigger as it quickly approaches the child.

Rosen's versatile writing is in tune with his readers and their life: he writes from the point of view of a child who never really grew up. He gives importance to their small everyday experiences and struggle; at the same times, he introduces them to broader, more serious issues.

3.3. GRACE NICHOLS

Among these authors, some invite children to hold their own against an inconsistent adult society, whilst others entrust their own values onto them, together with a cultural heritage that comes from faraway places. Grace Nichols belongs to the second category. She displays her Caribbean heritage and passes it on to her readers. A feeling of hope pervades her poetry, and she wishes to share that hope with her young readers. She speaks of the complexity of people's identity and explores positive ways to make it blossom. She also deals with the place of humanity on earth and the relationship we should build with nature and the environment around us.

Grace Nichols establishes an intimate relationship with her readers addressing them directly or telling stories and events in the first person. Her poems praise the uniqueness of all beings and people; children need to value their own identity without undermining others who are different. They need to build up confidence and communicate with different kinds of people, and cherish variety. She introduces them to landscapes and legends of her native Guyana; she tries to appeal to their curiosity and their flexible mind. She takes them by the hand, so that they do not see the world and others as threatening. Her poetry shelters children from the harshest part of reality and reassures them about themselves. She states it clearly in the title poem of her collection *Everybody got a gift* [2006]:

Everybody got a gift
Which they bring to the world.
Everybody got a gift,
Both boy and girl.

Some have a gift for singing,
Let them take their path,
Even if the only hit they make
Is singing in the bath.

[Nichols 2006]

Children's poetry has been progressing towards the definition of children's identity as separate from the world of adults and Nichols goes further: she praises children as unique individuals. She encourages them to discover their own talents and passions, and pursue them. She tries to teach them to love themselves at all times. She knows the hard times many of her young readers face in their daily lives. She tries to teach them to face problems with a positive attitude. "Give yourself a hug", the title poem of one of her most famous collections, contained in *Syn Time, Snow Time* [2013], is a declaration of her poetical intent.

Give yourself a hug
when you feel unloved

Give yourself a hug
when people put on airs
to make you feel a bug

Give yourself a hug
when everyone seems to give you
a cold-shoulder shrug

Give yourself a hug -
A big, big hug

And keep on singing,
"Only one in a million like me
Only one in a million-billion-trillion-zillion
like me."

[Nichols 2013]

The word 'hug' here seems to erase the negative words with which it rhymes: 'bug' and 'shrug'. A 'big, big hug' has the power to cure all problems.

Grace Nichols nurtures children's confidence and guides them towards the development of their empathy and care. Insecurity and lack of love breed

aggressiveness and indifference towards others and the world. She teaches children a welcoming attitude as a solution to these problems. She addresses her readers as substantially good and nice children in need of love and care. She has the voice of a mother and a sister, a winking and sweet accomplice, a sweeter Mary Poppins. She also tell them tales, mostly from her native Guyana. She awakens children's interest towards different countries and cultures by passing her heritage on to them. Landscapes, nature, animals are of great prominence in her poetry, and she wants to teach readers to value them so that they can take care of them in their future. An example is the enraged parrot in "I'm a parrot" from *Sun time, Snow time* [2013]:

I'm a parrot
I live in a cage
I'm nearly always
in a vex-up rage

I used to fly
all light and free
in the luscious
green forest canopy
[...]
So don't come near me
Or put out your hand
because I'll pick you
if I can
pickyou
pickyou
if I can

I want to be free
Can't You Understand

[Nichols 2013]

The parrot is furious, rude and unapproachable, because it is in a cage. It rebels against humans to be free again. The sound effects in this poem are

remarkable: the 'luscious/green forest canopy' alone depicts a wonderful and exotic landscape and the 'pickyou/pickyou' conveys the onomatopoeia of the parrot picking something with its beak. The final line with the capital letters on every word is like a scream or a plea. In this poem, the author teaches children that some animals are not pets: nature is not at our service and we must respect it. Otherwise, it will hurt us.

Nichols appears to perceive her young readers as curious and lively, something she certainly represents in her children characters. When she chooses children as her main characters, she has the ability to sketch witty, tender and funny portraits. Her children characters seem affectionate and curious of the world around them. Sometimes they laugh at adults, and point out their odd ways, but their attitude is not as resentful as it is astonished and amused. For example, the poem "I like to stay up" from *Sun time, Snow time* [2013] portrays the fascination of children for scary stories, that unmistakable mix of insatiable curiosity and fear:

I like to stay up
and listen
when big people talking
jumbie stories

I does feel
so tingly and excited
inside me

But when my mother say
'Girl, time for bed'

Then is when
I does feel a dread

[Nichols 2013]

Nichols uses here the Guyanese word 'Jumbie' for ghosts and the creole use of verbs adds colour and to this poem.

Children characters in Nichols can be interesting for their entertaining mixture of sweetness and irreverence, and the author is their accomplice. They can be ironic without being too aggressive, as Pythagoras in “Not living up to my name” from *Everybody got a gift* [2006]:

The isosceles
Brings on my allergies [...]

So any questions about Maths
I'd rather pass

Why on earth did my parents
Name me Pythagoras?

[Nichols 2006]

Despite her sympathy towards children, she does not pose as “one of them”: she gives them their own space, where she does not intrude. She encourages her readers from an adult position.

The author is especially interested in portraying girls as main characters of her poems: these female characters represent feminine aspects in ways that were previously unusual in children’s poetry. She empowers them in a subtle and natural way; she tries to avoid gender stereotypes and build realistic female characters that can encourage girl readers to be themselves. Like Jackie Kay, she puts girls at the centre of poems about sport on a few occasion, to picture the determination and strength of young girls. Already in Rosen’s poetry, the character Lizzie was a typical tomboy, who refused to wear skirts and was good at playing football. Whereas Lizzie faced a sort of discrimination and was an exception, Nichols’ female characters seem immersed in a relaxed and friendly setting. Other characters admire and envy their ability. The all-feminine atmosphere is a likely reason for this difference, as neither boys nor authority figures are present in these poems. Nevertheless, girl characters with attitude and a passion for sports can be encouraging

examples for girl readers. One example is Anita, the runner from *Sun Time Snow Time* [2013]:

When my friend Anita runs
she runs straight into the headalong –
legs flashing over grass, daisies, mounds.

When my friend Anita runs
she sticks out her chest like an Olympic
champion – face all serious concentration.

[Nichols 2013]

The two women poets of this selection show a special sensitivity to girls' upbringing and point of view and are overall more introspective in their writing.

Grace Nichols tries to convey her love of nature through her poems and inspire the same feeling to her readers. She puts nature at the heart of her poetry. Many of her poems are about fruits, flowers and animals, and she shows a deep emotional link with landscapes. She often writes about seasons, or uses animals as speakers in her poems. She can write a poem about daffodils and give voice to rain. Her book *Sun Time, Snow Time* [2013] combines two of her former collections, *Come on into my Tropical Garden* and *Give Yourself a Hug*. This double collection is like a home with two windows, one on “that bright hot ‘floody’ world of the village [Nichols] grew up in”, and the other on a picture “very much inspired by life in England and especially by the weather” [Nichols 2013], as she states in the introduction. The author guides us as we peek at the landscapes, sounds and flavours that shaped her identity, as she is aware that many of her readers do not know the kind of nature she describes. The poems set in her native Guyana describe a world full of colours, sounds and flavours. She invites readers to immerse themselves in the sunny atmosphere of poems such as “Come on into my tropical garden” [2013]:

Come on into my tropical garden

Come on in and have a laugh in
Taste my sugar cake and my pine drink
Come on in please come on in

And yes you can stand up in my hammock
and breeze out in my trees
you can pick my hibiscus
and kiss my chimpanzees

[Nichols 2013]

Her imagery is deeply sensuous and appeals to children's perception, with pictures of landscapes that they can almost smell, taste and touch. She marks a contrast with the poems set in England, where she often jokingly complains about the weather. She even addresses the sun as 'moody one', like an indulgent mother to a spoiled child. She wallows in flavours, especially fruits: "Mango", "Star-Apple" and "Drinking Water-Coconut" from *Sun Time* make the reader's mouth water and entice curiosity, whereas "Strawberry", "Blackberry" and "Raspberry" depict common berries under a different light, giving them new charm. Food is important as a part of culture, and fruits are a gift of nature:

Have a mango
sweet rainwashed
sunripe mango
that the birds themselves
woulda pick
["Mango" Nichols 2013]

But raspberry
why does one of
your tiny pulps – all aglow

Remind me so
Of a full-blooded mosquito?
["Raspberry" Nichols 2013]

However, her most interesting poem about fruits is “Icons” from *Give the Ball to the Poet* [2014]. There, she depicts a cultural comparison, where fruits bear all the meaning of colonialism and the ambiguous relationship people like Nichols entertain with the two cultures they represent:

Among the English icons praised to the skies:
Iceapples, Yardleys, Grapes,
The unseen Snowflake.
We’d watch the shopkeeper’s crafty hands
Among the apple-crates.
[...]
And the glistening red unbitten
Jewels instead of fruits.
[...]
Still I must say that it gladdens the heart
To see how both my apple-eating daughters
Have emerged; carefully avoiding the pith and pips,
While drooling endlessly over the mango
Two sun-starved Eves

Making a meal of the old creation myth.

[Nichols 2014]

The poet expresses here her satisfaction, because through taste, her daughters have absorbed part of her culture. Their identity is mixed and they choose the parts they prefer: the mango. They are two Eves, two new and unspoiled human beings. They deny the creation myth where the apple dominates; they can create a new culture and a new world, by discovering their roots.

At some point, Nichols finds a connection between her two countries, which is precisely the weather. This happens in “Hurricane hits England” from the anthology *Give the Ball to the Poet* [2014], a collection by many Caribbean poets, edited by Grace Nichols and her husband John Agard. The tropical storm brings the speaking voice in the poem closer to her ancient culture and

heritage. The hurricane is a turbulent messenger, who aims at bringing everything together and assuring a continuity through the everlasting forces of nature:

Tell me why you visit
An English coast?
What is the meaning
Of old tongues
Reaping havoc
In new places?
[...]
Ah, sweet mystery,
Come to break the frozen lake in me,
Shaking the foundations of the very trees
Within me,
Come to let me know
That the earth is the earth is the earth.

[Nichols 2014]

She endows her poetry with a sense of magic and ancestral wisdom rediscovered. She evokes tropical deities from syncretic and ancient religions, like Oya and Shango of the candomblé and the Aztec god Huracan. Mysticism and legends are frequent in her poetry and she exposes them as a part of her roots; through these topics, she opens a spiritual level of connection to nature and the earth for readers. The deities and mythical beings she portrays are connected deeply with the earth; they commend fascination and respect and cannot be conquered.

In a similar way, she depicts parts of the environment as mystical entities, to be loved and revered. The forest and the sea are most frequent, but the moon is another striking example. She portrays the moon in different poems, and she uses it as a motherly metaphor for the womb in “In the great Womb-Moon” [2013]:

Time was a millennium
In my mother’s belly

How I frog-kicked
And I frolicked
Like a cosmic
Little comic . . .

[Nichols 2013]

Everything changes when she writes about daily life within the context of the house or the streets. Her verse becomes playful, and poems are shorter, lively; her rhythm is faster, and she experiments with urban slang and child speech. Her creative use of languages provides her verse with a unique geographical quality, the chaotic sound of the street or the colourful quality of creole language. She explores the visual dimension in many ways, stretching words along the page and playing with poetical features. Her song-like poetry has varied inspiration and rhythm. Rap-like, urban verse is fast-paced and lively, like “Cat-Rap” from *The Poet Cat* [2000]:

Well they say that we cats
Are killed by curiosity
But does this moggie mind?
No, I've got suavity.
[...]
Nap it up
Scratch it up
The knack is free
Fur it up
Purr it up
Yes that's me.

[Nichols 2000]

The use of urban slang and short lines composed of short words give the poem a lively beat; the speaker talks like in rap battles, but Nichols plays with language using terms associated with cats, like ‘fur’ and ‘purr’. The word ‘scratch’ is especially interesting: it can be associated with both the cat’s claws and the ‘scratching’ of a record by hand by rap DJs.

On other occasions, especially when she writes about her ancestors and her Guyana, her verse has a chanting rhythm that evokes an ancient culture and slavery like in “They were my people” [2013]:

They were women weeding, carrying babies
to the rhythm of the sunbeat

They were my people working long ago
to the rhythm of the sunbeat

They were my people with scars to show
rising-up to the rhythm of the sunbeat.

[Nichols 2013]

Forms of repetition are among her most used features; in this case, the anaphora at the beginning of every couplet gives the poem a sense of pride for the resilience of the author’s ancestors and her proximity to the sun as an entity. People who work and live to the rhythm of the sunbeat are closer to the cycles of nature. She often portrays natural elements as deities or ancestral entities in solemn song-like poems. A few examples are “Sea Timeless Song”, “For Forest” and “Time was a Millennium”. She establishes the importance and the care for humanity’s roots in nature and time with this eerie rhythm:

Hurricane come
and hurricane go
but sea – sea timeless
sea timeless
sea timeless
sea timeless
sea timeless

[Nichols 2013]

This treasure of multiple means of expression in her poetry communicates to readers the great richness of multiculturalism. She is the author that provides young readers with a colourful bouquet of languages and styles; she paints

for them pictures of a wonderful and cheerful world, and trusts them with the ability to make it real, by learning to love themselves, others and nature.

3.4. JACKIE KAY

Jackie Kay is the voice of the outcast. Whereas Grace Nichols is sweet and encouraging, Jackie Kay has a strong, irreverent spirit. Her poetry has many nuances, and she can picture misty landscapes or daily life situations with a delicate voice, and tell funny stories in a cheerful mood. However, she often takes the role of children's fierce ally, and points at unfairness and conflicts in children's everyday life, standing by them when they feel ignored.

Among the four authors, she is the one who portrays the most complex characters. Most of them are depicted with great attention to detail: some become recurring characters, and make appearances in more than one book, like Carla Johnson. Readers get the impression that she is telling stories about real children. She can relate to children's loneliness and worries, so she gives her readers imaginary friends or mirrors, to let them know that they are not alone. Some of the characters are the author herself in disguise telling her experiences as an adopted child; her brother and son also appear sometimes as characters. Uncompromising is the first adjective that comes to mind to describe Jackie Kay's children characters.

The path of children's poetry towards the independence of children shows its side effects when they face the struggles of contemporary society. Their life is confusing and often quite difficult, and they lack a real role model, so they tend to improvise. They often fight and have problems at school, in the street, and at home alike. They feel that they do not have any control over life or any help from adults. The search for identity is one of the main themes of Kay's poetry, and she depicts it with great richness of nuances. One of her most cheerful animal poems, "The Frog who dreamed she was an Opera Singer" [1998] from the collection of the same title, is truly about following our heart even if it means defying society's expectations. Kay is saying to her readers that if a frog can become a true "prima donna", they should be free to follow their dreams and goals too:

She dreamed so hard she grew a long throat
And a beautiful polkadot green coat

And intense opera singer's eyes.
[...] All the audience in the Queen Elizabeth Hall,
Gasp'd to see one so small sing like that.
Her voice trembled and swelled
And filled with colour.
That frog was a green prima donna.

[Kay 1998]

Kay relishes the use of masks, doubles and the multiplication of characters to illustrate the complexity of children's search for an identity, and the frog is but a small example of this. The main recurring pair of characters in her poetry are Carla Johnson and her imaginary friend of the same name. She dedicates many poems to them in *Two's company* [1992]:

When it's dark in my room my friend
Carla Johnson comes – she has wings
Fabulous things, kiwi fruit and tangerines.
Come on Carla, she taps me on the shoulder.
We fly out the window, quiet as burglars.

[Kay 1992]

Jackie Kay is aware of children's tendency to build aliases and projections of themselves, and it is one of her favourite themes both in *Two's Company* [1992] and its continuation *Three has Gone* [1994].

Jackie Kay is openly on the child's side. Among the poets, she is the one who empathises the most with childhood's dark sides; she shows more than one side of children's reality. In some of her poems, bullies can be the main characters; some of them may be facing discrimination of their own. A very mischievous child could either need attention or take advantage of the patience of adults. Both could be true, as is implied for the character in "Attention seeking" from *Three has gone* [1994]:

I know I'm needing attention
Because I hear people say it.
People that know these things.

I'm needing attention,
So what I'll do is steal something.
[Kay 1994]

Her poems show children who are concerned with problems and thoughts that are too big for them. They ask important and difficult questions about life, growth and death. Two poems that display this with striking clarity are “Things of the past” and “Three has gone” from *Three has gone* [1994]. The first ends with a resolution:

I'll just have to accept it:
Children grow up; things change.
[Kay 1994]

“Three has gone”, on the other hand, portrays the child’s first thoughts and fears about death:

No, I don't want to die.
It would be too tiring expiring.
Death is holding your breath.'
[Kay 1994]

However, not all of her children characters are gloomy, mistreated and insecure; other poems portray determined children with a positive attitude towards life. She uses sport as a topic to exemplify the determination of young girls to follow a passion. This happens, for example, in “Girl Footballer” from *The Frog who dreamed she was an Opera Singer* [1998], where the young ‘talented girl’ replays an exciting goal in her mind:

Nothing like that feeling you get
When the ball bulges in the back of the net
[Kay 1998]

Her poetry is focused on the difficulties of children’s relationships with adults and peers, and their efforts to define their own identity against an often-unwelcoming background. Thus, her characters are also her most important

theme, even in some poems about animals, as seen with the frog. She is also the poet who portrays adults the most, especially elders. Her poems about them often convey a feeling of solitude and tiredness, together with a strong determination and practical attitude. Many of them are in her collection *Red, Cherry Red* [2007], the most unusual and meditative. “The knitter” is an example:

When my man was out at sea I knitted the fishbone.
Three to the door, three to the fire.
The more I could knit, the more we could eat.
I knitted to mend my broken heart

When the sea took my man away, and by day
I knitted to keep the memories at bay.
I knitted my borders by the light of the fire
When the full moon in the sky was a fresh ball of yarn.

[Kay 2007]

The poem is melancholic and dreamy. The speaking voice is an old woman who knits, and she shows all the common sense and wisdom of her age. She keeps busy with a practical activity to avoid melancholy and sadness. However, her imagination takes over and she shows a romantic side, by picturing the moon as a ball of yarn. The anaphora of ‘I knitted’ shows how much she clings to her activity. This part of the poem shows two contrasting elements: the sea and the fire. The sea is associated with the man and the memories she keeps ‘at bay’. The woman turns her back on the outside world and keeps to herself, her fire, who symbolises a home and security. However, her knitting itself shows that she is in between her memories and her home: this is clear in the line “three to the door, three to the fire”.

People are the focus of Kay’s poetry, and she displays a great variety of nuances to describe them. However, they are not her sole focus. Travel, both real and imaginary, is another frequent element and topic. It is a part of her major interest in escapism. Her children characters often dream of escaping

and travelling abroad, mostly to exotic places. Together with imaginary friends and doubles, their parallel world often includes imaginary travels or places, like Carla Johnson's "castle underneath the sand" where "nobody says 'if you don't... then you can't...'" [Kay 1992]. Kay gives both her readers and her characters a break from their confusing and often disappointing daily life. Landscapes are very important in her poetry; she depicts places to symbolise moods and states of mind. This kind of meditative poetry is unique of her among the authors selected, and is unusual for children. The kind of places she describes are equally unusual, as they are often neither exotic nor colourful. Sea landscapes are prevalent, and she seems to favour northern seas; she often portrays the inhabitants of the North as well. The views inspire a feeling of distance, and a character that expresses ideas of travel and search for self is often present. The sea is a mirror of these characters and their emotions, like in the lyric "Overboard" from *Red, Cherry Red* [2007], where these poems are especially frequent:

When you look over the board, my friend,
The waves in their wisdom *again* and *again*
Will let you be you, will give you memories
And take them away as you stare into the sea.
Your face is dreamy; your thoughts far away.
How many times does a woman cross the sea

Before she bides at home and calls it a day?

[Kay 2007]

The sea is both a mirror and a cure. It reflects the woman's memories, and takes them away, releasing her from a burden. The crossing of the sea is a metaphor for the woman's introspection on her own thoughts and memories. The purifying action of the sea compensates the effort of immersing herself in her own mind. The sea becomes a comforting, almost maternal figure. The sea can also be a metaphor for growing up and separating from childhood. This happens in the poem "The Past" from *The Frog who dreamed she was an*

Opera Singer [1998]. The theme of doubles is present once again: as we grow up, we leave a small version of us behind:

The girl I was is out at sea.
Isn't it funny? She just walks,
Further and further away, slowly.
[Kay 1998]

This separation bears a sense of longing and peace; Kay attempts to reassure children about growing up and soothe their doubts and fears. Parting with our childhood can be sad, but we can accept it as a natural event.

Elsewhere, the topic of travels is less introspective, metaphorical, and more endowed with the excitement and curiosity of exploration and discovery of new places. "At Home, Abroad" from *The Frog who dreamed she was an Opera Singer* [1998] pictures this enthusiasm, with a hint of desire to escape. It resonates with the state of mind of children that have problems fitting in, and dream of a place where they will feel at home:

I draw
Duty frees
With every
Country's favourite
Sweetie, smiling
A sugary welcome,
And myself,
Cap-peaked,
Wondering if I am
'home'.

[Kay 1998]

This thought is a reassurance for Kay's readers, and another form of escapism in a parallel reality. She knows their ways of dealing with problems, and makes it possible for them to dream of a better place.

However, nature is not only a reflection of human emotions in Kay's poetry. It can also be a cause, and she inspires children to fight for its preservation.

She chooses the forest as a symbol of endangered nature. “Tomorrow they’ll be coming to get me” and “Oxleas Wood” are two poems about the forest in *Two’s Company* [1992]. The author conveys respect towards the age and wisdom of the forest and calls for its defence and protection. She touches on the issue of its inhabitants too, forced to move from their home of hundreds of years. The speaking voice of natives talks with a painfully pessimistic tone in “Tomorrow they’ll be coming to get me”:

We did mount protests. Sit-in-the-forest-
don’t-budge kind of thing. But we’re no match
for those big machetes. They don’t care.

[Kay 1992]

The poem ends on a menacing note: living in touch with nature, the inhabitants of the forest are more aware of the dangers implied in savagely exploiting it. They may be unable to protect it, but they leave us with a grim prophecy:

There will be floods like Noah never imagined.
Bright blinding lights. The earth’s skin
Burnt to tatters. Mark my words.
This is a dangerous game they’re playing.

[Kay 1992]

Who can take over and prevent the destruction natives foresee? According to Kay, children can. They have the strength and the open mind to build the same close relationship with nature and protect it against its enemies. Where natives show resignation, children fight back, like in “Oxleas Wood”. In *Two’s Company* [1992], these two poems are one after the other, so that they give the impression of a continuity, from forest natives to children:

They are trying to build a motorway
Through this magic mystery,
This ancient wise wood.
[...] We won’t let our children be chopped down.
We will all lie down.

We are the children who won't let our children go
We are the parents who must lie down.

[Kay 1992]

This is a powerful declaration, and children characters' adamant determination counterbalances the negative prophecy. Their determination is symbolised by the constant anaphora of 'We' at the end: children unite against nature's destruction. For this purpose, they even transform in the last line, and become 'parents'. The word implies a responsibility and children are willing to take responsibility for the environment. Kay trusts her readers to understand the value of respect towards nature, and to fight for it against adults, if necessary. The 8.000 years old wood of Oxleas, in the southeast London, becomes a symbol of a nature repeatedly menaced by profit and avidity. Kay sees the importance to educate children so that they can learn from the faults of the older generation. Like all the poets in this selection, she respects children and sees them as a hope for a better future, where most of her generation has failed.

Jackie Kay's poems are often quite long and have a speech-like quality, sounding almost like prose. Her writing looks carefully polished, especially in lyrics, and she tends to use an elaborate vocabulary. Readers can feel the care with which she chooses her words; she has a special gift for descriptions. The subject matter and the speaking voice influence her style: when the main character is a child, her rhythm becomes lively and she imitates their manner of speaking.

She favours free verse, and tends to opt for rather long lines; she often uses effects like enjambments, and cuts sentences across different lines. She can use repetition of minimal lines to create the effect of a song refrain. The graphic effects in Kay's poetry are very interesting and she makes great use of them. She employs onomatopoeia and capital letters extensively. The dialogues are the context where these effects are easiest to notice: capital letters are present sometimes when the character is screaming or to highlight an important element, whereas italics often mark the dialogue. Some examples can be the

poem “Chatterbox” from *The Frog who dreamed she was an Opera Singer* [1998]:

SHUT UP, said the coarse voice,
And worse – BUTTON IT.

[Kay 1998]

She can combine various effects in the same poem, and her pages can have a strong visual effect, like in “Word of a Lie” from *The Frog who dreamed she was an Opera Singer* [1998]:

I am the fastest runner in my school and that’s

NO WORD OF A LIE

I’ve got gold fillings in my teeth and that’s

NO WORD OF A LIE

In my garden, I’ve got my own big bull and that’s

NO WORD OF A LIE

I’m brilliant at giving my enemies grief and that’s

NO WORD OF A LIE

I can multiply 3 billion and twenty-seven by nine billion four
thousand and one in two seconds and that’s

NO WORD OF A LIE

[Kay 1998]

In this poem, she uses capitalisation to enhance the visual effect of the refrain. The lines get longer and longer, to the point where they do not fit. Despite their increasing length, every line between the refrains is written as a single line. The enjambment after every ‘that’s’ creates a sense of suspension just before the refrain.

Like Grace Nichols, Jackie Kay experiments with language. Geography is quite relevant to her poetry, and the use of dialect has a very strong identity meaning. An example of her use of Scottish words in poetry is “Sassenachs” from *Two’s Company* [1992], where the two main characters are riding on a train from Scotland to London, and one of them starts to sing:

And the train’s jazzy beat joins her:

Sassenachs sassenachs here we come.
Sassenachs sassenachs Rum Tum Tum
Sassenachs sassenachs how do you do.
SASSENACHS SASSENACHS WE'LL GET YOU!

[Kay 1992]

The song gives the poem a lively and fast beat that follows the train, as the speaking voice observes. In the last line, the capitalisation of all the words emphasises the child character raising her voice for the song's close.

On a more serious note, in her book *Red Cherry Red* [2007], she expresses a deep love for Shetland. She uses the local dialect in many poems, like in the already quoted poem "The Knitter":

I knitted to begin again: lay on, sweerie geng.
Takkin my makkin everywhere I gang.
Een and een. Twin pins. My good head.

[Kay 2007]

Jackie Kay uses a wide variety of styles and ways of speaking in her poems. Her detailed and evocative descriptions can give way to colourful and dreamy narrative poems or snappy dialogues. Her characters have very different ways of speaking, which contributes to their characterisation. When the speaking voice is a teenager engaged in a dialogue, they can be rude and harsh and use some profanity. Among this poets' selection, Jackie Kay is the author with the widest emotional palette, and her style of writing reflects this greatly.

3.5. JOHN AGARD

John Agard is a poet with great talent as a teacher. His books for children usually expand on a topic or a school subject; he employs his remarkable skills as a poet to make the material enjoyable for children. His production is unusual compared to the rest of this group: he informs his readers, and tickles their curiosity towards the world. He can put any subject into poetry, be it Maths, Physics or ancient Guyanese sayings; he expands on these topics with facts, anecdotes and jokes. For instance, in *Laughter is an egg* [1990], laughter is the main theme and often the main character. The egg itself is one of the author's favourite metaphors, and usually represents the soul and the heart of a person. The poem "Laughter's morning advice" plays with words and the metaphor of eggs and laughter:

So you crack eggs
So you crack jokes

So why not start your day
with scrambled jokes on toast?

[Agard 1990]

Agard suggests here a daily dose of laughter and happiness to his readers, to start the day well. The laughter represented by an egg travels throughout the poems in the book. Agard plays hide-and-seek with his readers: he hides laughter in some poems and shows it again in others. For example, laughter seems almost absent from the poem "Aunty Grouchy":

Aunty Grouchy was so grouchy
she could not stand
to see children happy.
Children, she said, need a ruling hand.

[Agard 1990]

The poem features examples of Aunty Grouchy scolding children; her portrait is the core of the poem. Everything seems unrelated to the book until the last two stanzas:

If she heard them laughing
she'd remind them of the saying:
Laugh before breakfast, cry before nightfall.
I think you'd be better off praying.

The children thought of putting
a spider in her bedding,
but then they remembered Aunty Grouchy
made such wonderful egg-and-custard pudding.

[Agard 1990]

Both laughter and the egg are present, although separated. Agard keeps his readers' attention awake with such games.

Another interesting book is *Grandfather's Old Bruk-a-down Car* [1994], where each poem focuses on objects that bear a special meaning. Children tend to grow fond of their favourite toys or even random objects. Michael Rosen had already explored our emotional relationship with objects. Agard traces human portraits where our tendency to feel affection towards inanimate objects seems universal. Objects are metaphors, too; part of the poems are riddles where objects represent body part. So, the camera that "has a shutter/ but doesn't click" is the eye and the chair that "comes with me/ when I go to town" is the bum [Agard 1994]. This approach is typical when teaching children how their body works.

Agard overturns clichés and makes knowledge come alive in funny ways; he attempts to entice his readers' curiosity. He opens doors, so that they can look at reality from different angles, defy commonplaces and create progress for humanity. His educational books are a subtly criticise the education system, because it makes scientific subjects boring for children. His *Einstein, the girl who hated Maths* [2002], winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry

in 2012, is dedicated to his daughter Kalera “for asking in the first place, ‘Dad, why don’t we migrate to a country where there’s no maths?’” [Agard 2002]. He consistently uses features such as the humanisation of elements like numbers, the funny reinterpretation of historical characters, and fascinating facts of history, legends and archaeology. “Once upon an equilateral Triangle” [2002], for example, is a poem with multiple layers:

An equilateral triangle
Grew tired of being equilateral.
No, I want to live life to the full.
[...] So the equilateral triangle
Divided each of its sides into thirds
And did a little whirl and a swirl.
[...] With a final spin and shake
The triangle changed to a hexagon,
Taking the form of, guess what? A snowflake.

[Agard 2002]

Agard relates the geometry to something familiar and fascinating to children. The poem includes many interesting features: a two-dimensional geometric shape who wants to “live life to the full” as a subtle joke; verbs of movement such as ‘spin’ and ‘shake’ that make a flat shape come alive. At the same time, the poem conveys a liberating message: children should take risks, because something marvellous might ensue. Agard uses famous inventors and mathematicians as speaking voices to convey the same message: think outside the box, use knowledge to defy conventions, like young Galileo in this poem from *Hello H2O* [2003], Agard’s book on Science:

‘Daydreaming again, Galileo?’
His teacher asked with a frown.
‘Aren’t you supposed to be reading?’

‘I am,’ replied Galileo.
‘Don’t you see my eyes turning
The pages of the skies?’

I'm busy browsing
The grand book of the universe.
A book I simply can't put down.'
[“Daydreaming Galileo”, Agard 2003]

He often borrows historical material and texts to put into poetry his own values: equality, mutual respect and care for the environment. Agard despises war: in his *Young Inferno* [2008], the lowest circle is occupied by ‘warmongers and tyrants’, turned into crocodiles, toads and worms. However, his readers need some weapons: an open mind, a compassionate heart, critical skills, and the knowledge to reach high levels of society. This intent is perhaps clearest in the *Young Inferno* [2008], where Aesop guides the teenaged ‘hoodie hero’ through the evil deeds of humanity. The book is a cautionary tale and a coming-of-age story in verse. The boy starts his journey “in the middle of [his] childhood wonder” which is the very first line, and grows to awareness thanks to his guide and teacher Aesop. At the end of his journey through humanity’s misery and malice, he will be confident and knowledgeable, ready to meet love.

Reinterpretations are indeed Agard’s forte: in *Goldilocks on CCTV* [2011] he gives voice to famous and beloved characters of fairy tales: he puts them in a contemporary background and gives them unexpected attitudes and voices. The book reads like a series of interviews and anecdotes, where every character reveals a new version of the story. He can reverse them completely, and create new role models for his readers. He gives princesses an independent and irreverent attitude, like Cinderella herself who begs her Fairy Godmother for a motorbike instead of a coach. He can also exaggerate their original behaviour, describing “Miss Goody Two Shoes” Goldilocks as a rebellious vandal, who “broke into a house/of suburban grizzlies, / [...] vandalised a chair/in the nursery/then tried out their Jacuzzi” [Agard 2011]. However, his most touching reinterpretations induce empathy towards evil characters, such as the two ugly sisters from Cinderella, the giant or Rumpelstiltskin, or neglected and underestimated characters like the dwarfs. One of the most striking poems gives voice to one of the most famous fairy

tales objects: the mirror. Three objects speak as animated personas in this book: the magic word, the apple and the mirror itself. The word and the apple focus on praising their own function in fairy tales. Instead, the poem *Mirror Mirror* [2011] conveys a deep and almost menacing message, showing different layers to Agard's poetry:

Wipe from me the dust of your deeds. Try.
I reflect the you behind the mask.
And my one fault is I cannot lie.

So come on. Ask the burning question.
Break me, if my answer displeases.
I speak louder when I speak in pieces.

[Agard 2011]

There is more to fairy tales than meets the eye: to Agard, their wisdom is timeless, but has to be adapted to the historical context. By making characters more contemporary and sometimes harsh, he stays true to the original purpose of fairy tales: teaching behaviours and knowledge to children, sometimes in hard ways. To reach this goal, he reprises elements of the original versions that were lost in cleansed, "cheesier" adaptations. For instance, the cutting of toes and heels Cinderella's stepmother imposes to her daughters. "A Mother's advice on the Subject of putting Big Feet into Tiny Slippers" contains rather clear and bloody suggestions expressed with a – seemingly ironic – delicate and polished way of speaking:

Yes, when you're Mrs Prince
one piggy less won't be missed.
Besides, you can always hobble
to the tune of nuptial bliss.
As for those heels of yours,
slice off a bit if you insist.

[Agard 2011]

However, the poem ends on a rather ambiguous note. We can make the hypothesis that a strict mother who orders her daughters around sounded like an unlikely image in a contemporary interpretation. A passive-aggressive attempt at persuasion may seem more suitable for the tone of the poem:

Daughters, use your wits.
Your big feet are nature's gifts.
So would you rather be
A millionaire's hobbling bride
Or rejoice in your plus-size stride?
Daughters, down life's road,
May your heart, like your feet, be wide.

[Agard 2011]

Another interpretation assumes that Agard wants to attribute to the mother's character his own principles; thus, the entire poem is ironic, except the end. If this is the case, the final stanza overturns the meaning completely, and condemns drastic changes for the sake of profit. The ambiguity of the poem leaves it to the reader to provide a personal interpretation. The writing certainly plays with the fascination of children towards grim and bloody imagery. Agard is prone to paradox and irony, and he trusts children's intuition and their spirit to understand the meaning and message of his poetry.

The poet communicates with children in a continuous dialogue, but he seldom depicts them as complex and well-rounded characters. His children characters are sketches, representations of a given moment and state of mind, often linked to school and learning. For instance, Einstein, the girl who hated Maths, is very similar to the Pythagoras portrayed by Grace Nichols. Einstein will be luckier, because through games and tales by her loving parents, she will learn to love Maths eventually:

And sure as flower petals come in fives
like the points of stars in the skies,
Einstein began to feel maths come alive.

And while Mum and Dad clicked their fingers,
Einstein tapped her feet to the beat of numbers.

[Agard 2002]

Agard gives a more detailed depiction of the main character of his *Young Inferno* [2008]. He is a realistic, lifelike teenager, but he, is a symbolic and positive representation of childhood too. The boy represents the transition between childhood and adolescence. He is rather witty, clever and bold, but neither spoiled nor arrogant. He accepts guidance from an adult - although it is Aesop, thus an historical character - but he does not hesitate to question him when he deems it necessary. His respect is not subjugation, and he often jokes or asks questions, as can be seen in some extracts:

So I joked that I'd heard of the city Dis,
Where everybody disses everybody. [Canto 8]

[...]

Teacher, tell me, are there many more ditches?

I've seen plunderers, hypocrites, torturers...

I can't take much more of bastards and bitches. [Canto 11]

[...]

'Teacher,' I joked, 'mind if we wait for a bus?' [Canto 11]

[Agard 2008]

Agard's characters do not show complex dynamics. They are puppets moving against an impressionist background, and they perform actions that are functional to the writer's message. However, the situations, the actions, and the features of the character are engaging and intriguing for Agard's young readers. Agard often depicts unexpected characters, like chemicals, polygons, numbers, when he approaches school subjects. He had already employed a similar, albeit more common, strategy in his book *We animals would like a word with you* [1996], where animals advocate for the protection of the environment. Here we can find his grim sense of humour again, for example in "Crocodile's Tale":

The last man who mistook me for a log

Lost half-a-foot and can no longer jog.

[Agard 1996]

It is a short, prose-like poem, where the crocodile is the speaker and states what happened as a simple fact. The calm, almost cold tone contrasts starkly with the crocodile's statement. Nature needs to be respected for what it is, and animals are not toys, nor can they be treated like a possession. The animals in this book contribute to Agard's constant purpose to overturn common misconceptions; in this book, he plays on common sayings, like "Rat Race":

Ever seen a rat
In a bowler hat
Rushing to catch a train?
[...]
No, my friend,
We rats relax.

[Agard 1996]

Most animals in the book are unfriendly towards humankind; they make fun of humans or complain about their bad reputation, like Mrs. Skunk or the pigs. "What a shame you lost your tail" presents a paradox: animals pity humans because they lack the physical feature of the tail:

'What a shame
You humans
Lost your tail', said Beaver.

Moving through water is easy to handle
When you're born with a ready-made paddle.

In this poem, the animal's attitude is presented as a parody of humans who feel superior to animals. At the end of the poem, humans react. The absence of a tail is compensated by

a bottom, a bum, a rear
[...]

good for sitting on
to improve our thinking skill

However, the tail is a strictly practical feature, and its use is limited. Animals use the tail for a specific function that is related to their way of living. That is why at the very end of the poem, humans claim:

‘But we have a brain
And we make things that heal and things

That kill.’

[Agard 1996]

Humans are different because they compensate the lack of tail with their thinking and building skills. They need no compassion from animals, because their multifunctional brain provides them with the ability and tools to compensate everything they lack physically. If humans wish, they can kill every living creature on the planet. The ending of this poem stresses the negative side of the human intellect.

The author’s view on the environment is also present in *Hello H2O* [2003], and he expresses it in an unsettling way in the poem *Superbugs’ Chorus*”:

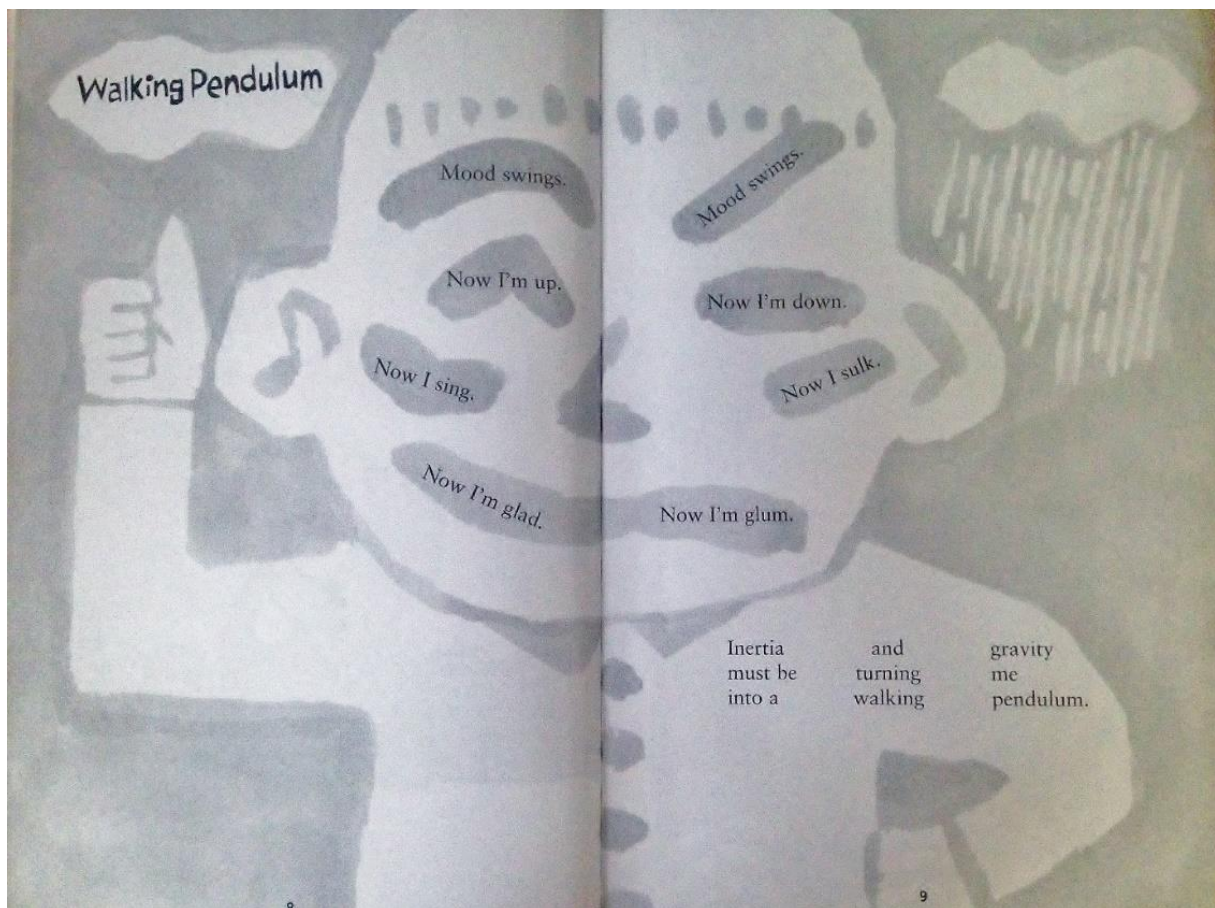
So why not give decay a chance
And share the planet with our kind?
We are the children of your waste,
The offspring of your extravagance,
And while humans dine and die,
We superbugs dance, we dance.

[Agard 2003]

His view seems rather pessimistic and serves as a reminder and a warning to readers. He sends a similar warning in his *Young Inferno* [2008], where he draws inspiration from one of the most famous parts of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and turns sinners into trees infested by birds with women’s heads. Whereas Dante puts there those who did violence to themselves, the suicide victims, he chooses “those who wounded Mother Earth”, the polluters who “plundered her

heart, uprooted her lungs”; the thorn trees avenge nature, and the birds with the face of old women are “disguised wind-goddesses/here to teach those exploiters a lesson” [Agard 2008].

John Agard shares with the other poets of this selection the preference for free verse and the flexibility of structure and rhyme scheme. He often plays with the form of the page: his verses can be scattered or written upside-down, and some words can be isolated on one side. He experiments with the visual dimension of poetry, employing a variety of structures. His verse often combines with illustrations, which gives interesting results. One of these visual poems from Hello H2O [2003] can be seen here:



Within his poetical research and experiments, Agard shows knowledge of poetical tradition; he aims to renew it, as he does in his *Young Inferno* [2008]. He openly takes inspiration from Dante's numeric symbolism, and uses number 13 as his reference in the book. He respects his source, but he makes a lighter and modern interpretation. He does the same with school subjects: he stays true to facts, but combines anecdotes and his poetical skills to make them interesting. Thus, he builds a bridge to bring young people close to knowledge and poetry.

4. CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AND ADULTS

Children's interactions and relationships are a core theme of children's poetry; interactions shape children's minds and their future as adults. Children face challenges in the contemporary world, because interactions have changed. Adults are insecure and confused, so children look elsewhere for role models. The children's world takes charge, and peers' judgement becomes more important than adults' judgement. Early in their lives, these children face the issues of a multi-layered, multi-cultural society, where social status, race and gender are relevant. Contemporary authors show us the world of children's relationships: the fracture between children and adults is complete in their poems. Contemporary poets attempt to repair it: as adults, they experience ways to communicate with children. The authors promote empathy: they empathise with their readers, and try to teach them empathy as well.

Poets are quite resourceful when they describe the delicate and changing dynamics of children's socialisation. Narrative poetry abounds, reporting events of family life or group games and anecdotes; the authors also employ the dialogue structure very often. Other poems are lyrical and introspective and give the reader a deeper insight on the psychological and emotional side of children's relationships. Children are freer to express themselves than ever before, but they are tentative and uncertain in their interactions. Ultimately, freedom confuses them and gives them a sense of loss; they often feel lonely and different. Contemporary poets guide their readers towards self-acceptance: once they accept themselves, they can learn to accept and respect other people. Poets improvise their role as guides, and try to understand this new generation: their readers' childhood is completely different from theirs. If freedom and empowerment confused children, contemporary poets suggest a solution: empathy and mutual understanding.

4.1. NEW FORMS OF DIALOGUE WITH ADULTS

When children interact with adults, they interact with society and they catch a glimpse of their future, when they will become a part of that society. When poets write about relationships between children and adults, the subject of their poetry is this encounter between children and society. Children's poets take advantage of their exceptional connection with the young to look at society from a different perspective.

The voice in their poems is interesting, as it reveals the poet's attitude towards the parties involved. In these poems, two kinds of speaking voice prevail: the child and the adult. These two voices imply two different kinds of perspective on the interaction. Poems with a child speaking voice often convey feelings of wonder and curiosity. An adult speaking voice takes the quintessential adult role: parents. The two kinds of voice show multiple sides to the child/adult relationship: affection, frustration, challenge, enrichment. These experiences are mutual, and poets do their best to explore both points of view, as they show adults' weaknesses and children's strengths.

The two speaking voices take many forms in these authors' production; they can take the form of a character or just be the 'I' of the poem. Authors tend to employ a child's speaking voice in poems about adults, to show a different perspective on adults' behaviours. The romantic convention of the child as a symbol of the unprejudiced eye is still very effective in contemporary poetry to highlight contradictions and strangeness in society. One such poem can be "Rucket's bucket" from John Agard's book *Grandfather's Old Bruk-a-Down Car* [1994]:

Mr Rucket had a bucket
which he never ever lent
For fear it might receive a dent

Then again, you could never tell,

Thought Mr Rucket.
Some fool might chuck it down the well.

When news spread that Mr Rucket was dead
All the people in the village said:
'He sure gone with he bucket to hell'.

What a surprise it was to find
Mr Rucket's bucket full of coins inside,
And a little note that read:

'This is to buy a new church bell'.
[Agard 1994]

The situation is presented from a seemingly neutral voice, but the message is clear: Agard criticizes people's love of gossip and malice. The final line is separated from the rest of the poem to enhance the surprise and shame the villagers. It is interesting to examine the structure of this poem, especially the rhymes: internal rhymes like 'Rucket'/'bucket' and 'spread'/'dead' convey an effect similar to children's playground rhymes. The oral nature of playground rhymes requires rhymes to help with memorisation, and rhymes are present throughout this poem. The most interesting occurrence is the rhyme 'hell'/'bell': the striking contrast in meaning mirrors the contrast between the profane and mean thoughts of the villagers and Mr Rucket's generous and pious intentions.

The poem follows the tradition of moral education: thus, Agard is in line with Bunyan and the educational poems of his *Book for Boys and Girls* [1686]. The rural semantic field largely present in the poem – the village, the well, the bucket and the coins – recalls the setting of a folk tale. The bucolic setting contributes to the feeling that the poem conveys a timeless moral message, like an Aesop's tale. Aesop is one of Agard's main inspirations: with his tales, he will be the protagonist's guide in the *The Young Inferno* [2008].

The moral message is a typical feature of Agard's production, and he is unique in this selection, because his poems are often openly moral. The best

example is his book *Say it again, Granny!* [1986], where every poem is based on a Caribbean proverb. The Granny reveals the message in every poem; she is a symbol of wisdom and of Agard's Caribbean roots. The book has the purpose of passing such knowledge on to children. A young girl is the speaker in this book: the author portrays her as a symbol of the new generation who will inherit the ancient wisdom in these proverbs. Her voice makes it easier for young readers to identify with, and lightens up the tone of the book. She acts as most children would: she is active, often distracted and a bit mischievous, but good at heart. Like other children speakers, she shows curiosity and puzzlement at the adult world. In some poems, she openly contradicts her granny, whereas in others she learns her lessons. An example is the poem "The older the violin the sweeter the tune":

Me Granny old
Me Granny wise
stories shine like a moon
from inside she eyes.

Me Granny can dance
Me Granny can sing
but she can't play violin.

Yet she always saying,
'Dih older dih violin
de sweeter de tune.'

Me Granny must be wiser
than the man inside the moon.

[Agard 1986]

Agard makes an extensive use of creole in this book, yet the reader can see the difference between the Granny and the child speaker. The child speaker only employs some very limited element of the creole language, mixed in a mostly English speech. The Granny's language contains much more creole elements. The articles are the main difference in this poem: the Granny uses

‘dih’ and ‘de’, whereas the child employs the English form ‘the’. This language difference can be a representation of a new generation that is more oriented towards the world and the future, a generation where many people left the Caribbean islands to move abroad. However, the new generation retains the language, like the frequent anaphora of ‘Me Granny’ shows. The creole element ‘me’ refers to a loved one in this case; the new generation will keep an emotional bond with the language and culture.

The poem displays other interesting features that give it a magical feeling. The expressive synaesthesia of ‘stories’ that ‘shine like a moon’ from the Granny’s eyes and the ‘man inside the moon’ evoke legends and tales, and a deep affection between the Granny and the child. The double mention of the moon contributes to the suggestive nocturnal atmosphere. However, the central stanza where the Granny can ‘sing’ and ‘dance’ gives a livelier and cheerful image.

Agard depicts wisdom as mysterious, but also dynamic. As the proverb says, “the older the violin, the sweeter the tune”: Caribbean wisdom might be ancient, but it is still very relevant and important. Agard depicts a relationship of affection and mutual exchange to appeal to his readers’ curiosity and feelings. His characters are symbols, and show that the communication between generations can be fruitful, despite the differences. All the authors in my selection convey their moral principles in their poetry. Most do so covertly, whereas Agard proves himself the poet teacher even in this difficult subject.

In poems about children’s interaction, the first-person voice is usually present, if a bit hidden. For instance, Rosen implies a child first-person voice in this poem from *Mind Your Own Business* [196]:

There’s a thin man
With a red jacket
Lips like bacon rind
Walks and whistles
His head knocked left
Carries old paper
That crackles in his pocket

Buys eucalyptus lozenges
And lives
In a room in a road by a pond
Says cheer up bubbles
If we pass on the pavement
And up go his eyebrows
Like broken string
His feet are cold
And his children have children now
He says
Like me one day soon
And nods some more

[Rosen 1996]

The portrait of the old man is endowed with fascination for old age and the inexplicable eccentricity of adults: this attitude confirms the presence of a child speaker. The portrait exudes a sense of solitude, which is frequent when elders are the topic. Children notice the sense of solitude and the odd behaviour: the poem expresses their natural curiosity. However, the ending has a grim note of which the speaking voice is not completely aware: the old man reflects upon youth as a temporary state.

This poem is unusual for Michael Rosen, because it feels almost like a “memento mori”, and reminds us of A.A. Milne: childhood and old age are not separate, but we all have to leave childhood and become old eventually. This shows that despite their prevailing cheerfulness and pragmatism, authors for children are aware of the one danger of childhood that nobody can prevent: its end. Rosen has already treated this topic in his poems: one example is “My Box”, which ends with the detachment from childhood imaginary dreams.

A child speaking voice in a poem can tune in to the feelings of the other characters in the poem, even when he/she does not understand their actions. Even when unnoticed, the child voice is a constant observer, like the child character in “The Black Sea” from Jackie Kay’s *Two’s Company* [1992]:

After John Macpherson drowned

I walked the Black Sea coast with Annie.
During the day we'd stand
At the very same spot and she'd say
John, Johnnie into the Black Sea
And other things I didn't understand.
It was only with me she talked to him.
I'd see the sea frothing out his mouth
The day my father tried to save him.

[Kay 1992]

Death is the main topic of this lyric. The actions and words of the adult who mourns the loss of a loved one are a ritual. The child's silence and unjudging attitude make the woman comfortable about showing her pain. The child guesses the meaning of the events; the image of the dead person has made a vivid impression on her mind, and she tries to process it and understand. The sea is a grim background for this lyric about the inevitable discovery of death. The child's thoughts, the words of the woman in mourning and the images engraved in the child's memory combine in a lyric that plays out like a stream of consciousness.

However, children's view on adults in these poems can have multiple sides and nuances. They often tend to idealise adults dear to them; their emotions are fresh, new and experimental, so everything seems possible. The poem "Lovesick" from Kay's *Two's Company* [1992] is unique among the authors taken into account: it describes the unrequited, unexpressed fascination and love of a young girl for her teacher. It is a stream of thoughts in the mind of a young girl, and portrays a generation striving for affection and consideration from their most important adults around. Kay vividly depicts the contrasts, the mixed feelings and strange situations between adults and young teenagers. This poem shows a girl torn about her feelings, and shows how deeply the author tunes in with her readers:

I'm scared of my own heart beat;
It's so loud someone might say
'who's on the drums?' and I'd blush

(not exactly beetroot) but blush
All the same.
[...]
Miss is from Bangladesh and has
Thick black hair, usually brushed
Into one sleek pony. If I could tie the bow!
She has lovely eyes, dark pools.
Miss isn't married.
[...]
Will I ever. Will I ever

Get older so that is doesn't hurt
So that my heart doesn't hurt.
So that I don't spend all my time
With my fingers crossed and wishing:
Say something nice. Miss, Please. *Something.*

[Kay 1992]

In this kind of poem, the author expresses the character's need for care and affection. Teenagers in Kay's production are tough, irritable, independent, but they have a soft side: they are mostly confused. The author gives an important hint about the colour of the young girl's skin: if she blushed, her cheeks would not be 'exactly beetroot'. Like many young girls in Kay's poems, she probably has dark skin. Therefore, the portrayal of a young teacher from Bangladesh may express the girl's need to find a model who is visibly similar to her. Kay often portrays young people who feel different because of their looks and the reactions of others ranging from curiosity to outright mistreatment. In this poem, seeing an adult teacher looking "different" might trigger the young protagonist's wish for emulation. Teenage love for teachers or adults symbolises their need to identify with a positive adult figure, to project themselves into their own future.

However, the most touching poems with children as a speaking voice usually portray family. To children, family is their closest group of adults, the people with which they interact the most. Family forges children's personality

and attitude towards the world. Thus, when a child or a teenager is the speaking voice of a poem, most adults are family members. When poets portray the closest family members from a child's point of view, emotions are more complex and varied. Some poems express great affection and admiration towards parents; authors usually express these feelings through a focus on small details and daily life. Children in these poems still believe in parents as invincible beings, but everyday reality and practical things convey the feeling now. One example is the following description by Rosen in *Mind Your Own Business* [1996]:

My dad's thumb
Can stick pins in wood
Without flinching –
It can crush family-size matchboxes
In one stroke
And lever off jam-jar lids without piercing
At the pierce here sign.
[...]
In actual fact, it's quite simply
The world's fastest envelope burster.

[Rosen 1996]

This child character portrays a small feature like a thumb to praise his father's strength. The thumb excels in many challenges of daily life. The escalation culminates at the end of the poem with the proud declaration of the thumb as the "world's fastest envelope burster". In this poem, Rosen shows how important such domestic achievements can be to children. Despite their independence and wit, they still crave protection from their parents. Even small features can make for strong parental figures.

The motherly counterpart to Rosen's poem is "Wha Me Mudder Do" from *Everybody Got a Gift* [2006] by Grace Nichols. In this poem, a child speaker portrays a remarkable mother figure:

Me mudder beat hammer
Me mudder turn screw

She paint chair red
Then she paint it blue

Mek me tell you wha me mudder do
wha me mudder do
wha me mudder do

Me mudder chase bad-cow
with one 'Shoo'
she paddle down river
in she own canoe
Ain't have nothing
dat me mudder can't do

[Nichols 2006]

This poem has a song structure with a refrain and verses. The use of creole gives it a fast, lively beat. The images of nature make it colourful, whereas the mother appears as an ideal woman and role model for young girls: brave, resourceful, adventurous. The child speaking voice is filled with awe, and idealises the mother, firmly confident that she can do anything. Again, the examples are realistic and taken from daily life and domestic chores. The remarkable element is the presence in the poem of tools associated with “manly” tasks: the hammer, the screw, the painting. For Grace Nichols, the ideal mother does not let gender stereotypes get in the way of her life. The mother is the first object of idealisation for many children, especially girls, and Nichols makes sure that the model inspires them to explore all possibilities of life. From this point of view, when the child speaker proudly states that “ain't have nothing/dat me mudder can't do” [Nichols 2006], she might really be saying that there is nothing women cannot do.

However, not all children feel so safe in their household. Instances of neglectful parents and unhappy families are present in contemporary poetry, too. In *Sun Time Snow Time* [2013], we find an exception to the usually

cheerful family portraits depicted by Nichols, the poem “Listening to a Tale about a Mum and Dad”:

Dad has given up smoking.

Mum has not.

They quarrel a lot.

Every time Mum lights up

Dad throws open the window

As if to get rid of a fog.

‘You’re polluting the place,’ he says.

Mum gives him a glare,

And goes on puffing like an engine anyway.

Then Dad who’s lost his job says,

‘You’ll die of lung cancer,’ ‘

Like hell I will,’ Mum puffs back in answer.

I sit through it

As though I’m dumb

What will become of Dad and Mum?

[Nichols 2013]

This poem depicts a painful reality through the eyes of a child. The small details convey a sense of dismay and dysfunctional family life. The child character plays dumb, almost instinctively, so as not to be involved in the parents’ quarrels, but the atmosphere deeply affects him/her. There is no interaction here: the parents seem completely self-absorbed, whilst the child is alone with the anxiety and uncertainty that the situation creates.

Jackie Kay goes further in her poem “Latch Key” from *Two’s Company* [1992]. The poem describes a situation of deep neglect of a child who wears his house key around his neck, because he is alone most of the time:

Danny’s mummy is always rushing off somewhere,

All dressed up to the nines and sometimes,
When the taxi comes she throws a kiss
Like a piece of bread to a duck; it drops on our street
With a sigh. Then Danny scoops up his kiss
And comes into our house holding on to it.
Can Danny have a bath with me? I plead,
And my mum sighs yes, she supposes so,
Because he is only seven, only seven.

[Kay 1992]

The child speaker in the poem does not entirely understand the situation, but can feel the deep sadness and loneliness of Danny. This poem exemplifies the instinct of solidarity and protection that children feel for their peers. The author builds a contrast between Danny's behaviour and his mother's. Danny's mother "throws a kiss/like a piece of bread" [Kay 1992]: with this simile, Kay compares the kiss to something homely. People throw old bread to ducks: Danny's mother does not care for him and she only gives him scant bits of her attention. On the other hand, Danny carefully "scoops up the kiss": even if the affection is not real, the child needs to hold on to the idea that his mother loves him despite everything. This poem expresses all the vulnerability of children when facing adults. They try not to show, but they still need affection.

Many poems about family with a child's speaking voice describe grandparents. Grandparents are usually beloved characters: they are steady adult figures; they pamper their grandchildren and they are funny and quirky. Even when they are grumpy, the speaking voice shows tenderness for them. They look eternal and firm, and convey an impression of authority and safety. These poets portray elders as much more reliable than other adults. They dictate rules with a steadier hand and are down to earth. The generational gap between children's parents and their grandparents is evident: grandparents tend to be sweet, but demand respect without hesitation. Family portraits imply a greater degree of interaction and emotional proximity, as in this poem by Grace Nichols from *Everybody Got a Gift* [2006]:

Granny Granny please comb my hair
You always take your time
You always take such care

You put me on a cushion between your knees
You rub a little coconut oil
Parting gentle as a breeze

[Nichols 2006]

Elders provide children with attention and care, something adults cannot always do:

Mummy Mummy
She's always in a hurry-hurry
Rush
She pulls my hair
Sometimes she tugs

But Granny
You have all the time
In the world

[Nichols 2006]

Elders have time and wisdom to dedicate to children, which is why children tend to be affectionate. However, children's energy tends to wear elders out, like the "Poor Grandma" of Nichols' *Sun Time Snow Time* [2013], complains:

Why this child
Can't eat without getting
Up to look through the window
Why this child must behave so

I want to know
Why this child
So spin-spin-spin-spin
Why this child

Can't keep still

[Nichols 2013]

The number of enjambments in these lines symbolises the child's restlessness, like verb repetition to name a continuous and repeated action – typical of creole languages. The poem conveys a sense of impatience. The same care and calmness that the child speaker enunciated as a quality of her Granny in the other poem becomes here a problem. The child is lively and eager to move and explore, and the Grandma is old and needs a more peaceful environment.

The poems with adults as a speaking voice gives us the other side to the relationship. Despite the strong bond between grandparents and children expressed in some poems, the two generations are completely different, and the gap becomes clear in poems where grandparents appropriate the speaking voice. An especially disheartening example is the “Great-Grandmother's Lament” from Jackie Kay's *Red, Cherry Red* [2007]:

I used to think that children loved to see their granny.
I don't know what it is. I stand at the windae.
I've never had them running intae see me.
They are no here for mair than two minutes
And then they're running away from me, bony hands,
Like I'm a bad auld witch spitting oot curses.
[...]
My great-grandchildren get served hand and foot
And here's me still cooking for myself –
My wee bit of veg, boiled ham. Nobody bothers
Staying for longer than a pound coin sucked intae a wee fist.
[...]
Everybody is that busy behind TV screens;
Nobody knows how to make a conversation
Let alone make a home-made meal or a fresh baked scone.
I'm not kidding you on. They're good for nothing.
Oh, we're the poorer for it, the hale human race.

I'll tell you, I'll be glad tae get shot o' this place.

[Kay 2007]

Jackie Kay is usually very honest to children readers, almost brutal, and many of the poems touch on loneliness and old age in this book. In this poem, the ending couplet provides a very grim conclusion, which shows the bitterness and sadness of elders. Children's interactions with them are complex, because children lack patience and can be restless and selfish. Moreover, the poem describes parents as servants to their children; the great-grandmother strongly criticizes this attitude. In poems where children are the speaking voice, this side of contemporary childhood is not visible. Throughout the poem, the reader sees children as insatiable, lazy and apathetic. Even the great-grandmother has to buy their company with a 'small coin'. However, the apocalyptic, exaggerated conclusion makes the poem seem like a bitter old person's complaint about younger people.

Grace Nichols' portrait "Little Dancer" from *Everybody Got a Gift* [2006] is inspired by the sculpture "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen" by Degas, but the author vividly depicts a real little girl. The speaking voice is an adult in this poem, and displays the concerned and loving attitude of a mother:

Now you must put
Your sinewy toes
To their hardest test.

Take a deep breath,
Little dancer;
Take a deep breath.

Before your burst
Into butterfly
From the tight

Cocoon of your dress.

[Nichols 2006]

Nichols gives voice to a generation of parents who tenderly watch over children with high expectations. Her way of bridging the gap through generations is encouragement: she does not put herself in a child's shoes, but she tries to look at them as closely as possible. The metaphor of the 'butterfly' and the 'cocoon' is quite common when referring to children: Nichols is encouraging the hesitant little girl to show her full potential. The lexicon in the first stanza contradicts the frail and delicate imagery of the butterfly: the dancer's 'sinewy' toes and the 'hardest test' convey a feeling of strength and power. The adjective 'sinewy' also depicts a realistic visual image of a dancer's foot. Dancers do not have delicate feet: a girl can strong and delicate at the same time.

Grace Nichols brings us the view of a concerned adult on children. She openly does it when she portrays two "Teenage Earthbirds" in *Everybody Got a Gift* [2006]:

Skateboarding
Down the street

Rising
Unfeathered –
In sudden air-leap

Defying law
Death and gravity
As they do an ollie
[...]
Only mother watches – heartbeat in her mouth.

[Nichols 2006]

Nichols openly relates to the apprehension of the mother at the end of the poem. Very short lines create a visual impression of speed and flexibility and emphasize the movements of the young skaters. The young boys are unconcerned with danger and the risks of their passion. They are compared to birds in two meaningful one-word lines: 'rising', like the phoenix from its ashes, and – with a wordplay on "feathers" – unfettered, although without

feathers. This poem draws on the theme of the young age as an age of “immortality” where everything is possible and limits are unacceptable. Law, death and gravity, a list, are only words to these young people, and their only concern is movement. However, at the end of the poem the reader sees another perspective. Nichols takes on the voice of a mother here: this mother is worried, but chooses not to limit her children’s freedom of choice and action. This generation of writers shows the meaning of the relationship between children and adults now: young people can be free to experience and learn from their own mistakes.

The complexity of the relationships between children and adults is clear in a specific structure: dialogue. It appears to be a favourite when these poets portray children’s interactions. In the first book by Michael Rosen, *Mind your own business* [1996], the introduction is an adult who questions a child:

What’s that there?
What’s what where?
I want to know what this is
Keep your hair on mate:
‘Mind your own business’

[Rosen 1996]

From the very start, Rosen shows himself as an accomplice for children. The children he depicts show themselves as bold and able to set the tone for their relationships with adults. Parents try to set themselves as authorities when children do not behave well, but they do it out of formality. Parents usually prefer to negotiate with children rather than imposing rules on them. Children act accordingly, as they seldom follow their parents’ orders. Parents choose to leave much freedom and space to children. Children themselves often seek their parents’ affection and attention. Some of their shenanigans appear to be caused by a desire to attract attention. Interaction and communication are lively as there is dialogue among the family members.

Sometimes children put themselves in difficult situations in Rosen’s poems. This usually happens their ideas or pranks result in trouble. In other poems,

children openly contradict adults and point out their faults. The poem “Useful instructions” from *You Wait ‘Till I’m Older Than You!* [1997] distorts a variety of typical recommendations:

Wipe that face off your smile
Don’t eat with your mouthful
When you cough, put your ear over your mouth
Don’t bite your nose
Don’t talk while I’m interrupting
How many tunes do I have to tell you?!

[Rosen 1997]

Rosen uses a very simple poetical effect: he combines commonplace sentences in different orders, and shows us the ludicrous side of education. Children see this side often when they get bored with adults’ instructions. This reminds us of “The good little girl” in *Now we are six* [2011] by Milne, where the girl wonders:

Well, what did they think that I went there to do?
And why should I want to be bad at the Zoo?
And should I be likely to say if I had?
So that’s why it’s funny of Mummy and Dad,
This asking and asking, in case I was bad,
‘Well? Have you been a good girl, Jane?’

[Milne 2011]

This attitude in children is clearly not new; it has been a while since they stopped taking adults seriously; many characters in Milne’s books are a perfect example.

In other Rosen’s poems, children can also miss their parents and have a loving, tender attitude. As usual, they express their affection through small everyday things. The two poems “Mum’ll be coming home today” and “Mum’s reply” from *Wouldn’t You Like to Know* [1981] feature a playful dialogue between a child and his mother. They are the strongest example of

contemporary poets' aim to show both sides to the relationship between children and adults.

Mum'll be coming home today
It's three weeks she's been away
When dad's alone
All we eat
Is cold meat
Which I don't like
And he burns the toast I want just-
brown
And I hate taking the ash-can down

He's mended the door
From the little fight
On Thursday night
So it doesn't show
And can we have grilled tomatoes
Spanish onions and roasted potatoes
And will you sing me 'I'll never more
roam'
When I'm in bed, when you've come home?

Mum's reply
If you like your toast
Done just-brown
Then take it out
Before it burns.
You hate taking the ash-can down?
Well now you know
What I know
So we might as well take turns.

But now I'm back,
Yes let's have grilled tomatoes
Spanish onions and roasted potatoes
Because you know
When I was away
I wanted nothing more
Than be back here
And see you all.

[Rosen 1981]

The two poems build a dialogue with elements of everyday family life: familiar rituals like bedtime and meals create bonds. The roles within the family are somewhat conventional: the mother is the glue that keeps the family together by creating healthy habits and spending quality time with children, whereas the father is almost an accomplice, covering up children's shenanigans, before the mother can blame them on him. The mother is a playfully dominating figure, and encourages her child to become independent. She encourages the child to take on domestic chores. Parents can be deeply attached to their children, and at the same time promote their independence and autonomy, like the mother of this poem. Rituals and chores keep the household alive, so

she encourages her child to take a more active part, as a training for the future. These poems show that parents do not always repress children's independence.

Children's independence has various meanings in contemporary poetry. Children can show their autonomy in many ways, from making their own toast, to expressing ideas on economic and ethical issues. One example of the latter is the protagonist of John Agard's *The Young Inferno* [2008]: his journey is a metaphor for growing up from childhood to adolescence. He goes through the phase where children start asking questions about life and society. If we look beyond the metaphor, we can see how typical the interactions between the young teenager and his master Aesop are: young people often discuss such subjects with adults around them. According to Agard, young people need to contradict adults and correct their teachings, to take the lead for the next generation. Among the many dialogues in Agard's book, one is especially interesting. In the "Canto 7", the boy and Aesop are watching the Big-Spenders and the Tight-Fisters fight each other, and Aesop tells a tale about an old man who kept his gold buried; his gold was stolen and his neighbours scolded him:

All you did was hoard and admire the gold.
You never spread any joy with it.
Why not admire a stone in the hole, silly old goat?

The moral of the story is clear: the old man should have used his money to help others. However, the boy is not convinced:

'But, Teacher,' I said,
'Should we jump to conclusions?
The old geezer, I agree, was a skintflint.
But that lump might have been for his pension.'

[Agard 2008]

Throughout the book, Aesop tells many tales, but here, the boy finds the one fatal flaw: moral tales are too simple to be believable. Some of their moral might be good, but we need to look at nuances when we apply them to real

life. The real world is more complicated. The meaning of the young boy's objection is that we must try to understand each other: this story is similar to the poem about Mr Rucket and his bucket. Both show how varied and complex people's motivations can be. Agard's message to his readers is that adults can fail: they are often quick to judge others and slow to listen to the voice of reason and empathy, no matter how wise they are. Aesop is a very good example, because he does not listen to the boy's different reading of his tale; instead, he brushes it off with a single line: "boy, do not start talking economics" [Agard 2008]. Adults have their opinions and ideas already formed and fixed, and their flexibility is limited. This is a very good example of the relationship between teacher and pupil and between adults and children. Teachers and adults can guide children's first steps and give them information, but children need to become autonomous, grow up, and help humanity evolve.

4.2. CHILDREN'S OWN WORLD: GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

In contemporary children's poetry, relationships among children are complex, varied and full of contradictions, like relationships between children and adults. Poets forego their adult perspective to describe this world: the child's speaking voice is dominant here. The poet creates children character to empathise with readers and picture their view of the world. Authors often use autobiographical material; for instance, Michael Rosen and Jackie Kay often recount their childhood.

The most striking element when analysing children's interactions in contemporary poetry is the mentality of children's groups. The process of children's empowerment poses a paradox: adults become more human and flawed, and peers become creators and enforcers of norms. Groups of friends or schoolmates influence children's lives more than ever before. The group provides safety and guidance, but limits their inner freedom. Children build their own sets of rules within social aggregation. Rules are often unspoken and strict. They evolve from standard behaviours: some children set the standard and the others follow. Rules and a codified standard behaviour make children's groups a parallel society, with its own dynamics.

Children's society is a product of adults in many ways. Children became independent because adults gave up their authority; independence led them to confusion and they turned to their peers for guidance. Solidarity among children is also an important element: the group is a safe haven and a protection against the unfairness and strangeness of adults' society. This kind of solidarity is the same of Blake's little chimney sweepers: however, the chimney sweepers could only comfort each other and hope for something better in the afterlife. Children in contemporary poetry are more active and often indulge in small acts of rebellion. It is also important to note that all of them live in a better environment compared to the chimney sweepers, even when they face parental neglect or mistreatment. Their relatively favourable life conditions could partly account for their boldness. However, both groups share the same kind of self-awareness as a separated community.

There is great peer pressure among children in groups; they are afraid to be isolated if they do not follow the rules. Contemporary children's poetry explores these complex sides to their interactions, and shows a change in perspective. After many years of poetry about compassionate, carefree children, poetry retrieves the puritan notion of children who are responsible of their actions like adults. However, adults have changed, and they do not impose good behaviour on children anymore. Now children observe them, instead of listening to them.

Poets covertly suggest that adult behaviour sets the example for the complex interactions among children. Adults follow the rules of a community and endure pressure from their peers to act according to conventions and social norms. Children recreate the same dynamics, within their own community, with their own rules. Like adults, children often follow self-imposed rules, out of fear of rejection. They rarely strain from the common behaviour, and the group usually does not need to impose sanctions. Children's rules can lead to conflict with adults, especially parents. Children struggle to reach a compromise between different sets of conventions. When conflict arises, they usually choose to follow the children's group. Children are usually sure of their parents' affection, and they fear their punishments much less than rejection from the group. Two kinds of tension are at play here: between the individual and the group, and between children's society and adults' society.

The difference between individual relationships and the group is clear if we consider poems' structure. When groups of children are the subject, the poem is usually a long narrative; lyrics are prevalent for interactions between two children. Individual relationships in a poem are portrayed by streams of thoughts and feelings, whereas funny events and anecdotes are typical in poems about the group. Poems on the relationship between two siblings are the most notable exception, as they are the most varied.

The relationship between siblings is the first and most intimate interaction among children. Contemporary poets portray all the ambiguities and the lack of inhibition of this kind of interaction. Unlike in other kinds of relationship,

siblings feel equal: there is no authority or subjugation. Fights and games are both very frequent, but no pressure or anxiety ensues. Complicity and affection are visible, but competition for space and parents' attention are an important element of this relationship. Michael Rosen writes about siblings in great detail, and he especially gives space to their pranks and games. These poems are largely autobiographical: Rosen often tells funny anecdotes about his own childhood and his relationship with his brother.

This relationship shows the highest amount of intervention from adults, mostly parents. It is usually purely instrumental and steered by one of the children. Tension and competition between siblings are frequent, but they tend to be quickly defused, and parental intervention does not affect them seriously. An example is this poem from Rosen's *Wouldn't You Like to Know* [1981]:

I'm the youngest in our house
So it goes like this:

My brother comes in and says:
'Tell him to clear the fluff
Out from under his bed.'
Mum says,
'Clear the fluff
Out from under your bed.'

[Rosen 1981]

The parents insist, and the main character weakly attempts to defend himself. After the attempts prove unsuccessful, the poem reaches a paroxysm of tension within the family. The tension is as futile as the reason, and both children appear to exaggerate on purpose:

So now my brother – all puffed up –
Says
'Clear the fluff
Out from under your bed,
Clear the fluff

Out from under your bed.'
Now I'm angry. I am angry.
So I say – what shall I say?
I say,
'Shuttup Stinks
YOU CANT RULE MY LIFE.'

[Rosen 1981]

The repetition of the couplet “clear the fluff out/from under your bed” [Rosen 1981] creates a refrain and exemplifies very well the kind of situation where many people start to repeat the same sentence and an annoying escalation ensues. Everything culminates in the last line, where the capitalisation of the sentence gives a clear image of the speaker screaming in frustration. The intervention of the parents serves the brother's purpose to annoy the younger child. The situation is both a prank and an attempt to affirm the brother's influence on their parents. However, the protagonist is not passive, as he correctly perceives his brother's insistence behind the parents' request. If the protagonist had called the brother out about the 'fluff from under the bed', he would have reversed the roles. Everything goes on between the two children, and parents are marginal to their exchange.

Siblings often make fun of parents together: this ambiguous dynamics shows the precarious authority of parents and the flexibility of the relationship between siblings. It is clear in this poem from *Mind Your Own Business* [1996]:

Father says
Never
Let
Me
See
You
Doing
That
Again
Father says
Tell you once

Tell you a thousand times
Come hell or high water
His finger drills my shoulder
Never let me see you doing that again

My brother knows all his phrases off by heart
So we practise them in bed at night.

[Rosen 1996]

The complicity between the brothers cancels the intimidation of the father's reproaches. One-word lines create a caricature: readers can almost see the two children imitating their father's reproaches, exaggerating his tone. The word 'phrases' in the penultimate line is even more telling: children know their father's "script", so there is no intimidation. Siblings can be accomplices or temporary enemies, but the complicity seems to take over more frequently than hostility. On other occasions, game scenes show very positive feelings in siblings' relationship. They can see bright side to sharing their space, like in this poem from Rosen's *Mind Your Own Business* [1996]:

That's [Sunday] when he [the brother] makes pillow dens
Under the blankets
So that only his left eye shows
And when I go deep-bed mining
For Elastoplast spools
That I scatter with my feet
The night before
And I jump on to his bed
Shouting: eeyoueeeyoueeeyouee
Heaping pillows on his head:
'Now breathe, now breathe'
And then there's quiet and silence
So I pull it away quick
And he's there laughing all over
Sucking fresh air along his breathing-tube fingers.

Actually, sharing's all right.

[Rosen 1996]

Company balances the sharing of the space for the protagonist of this poem. Compared to other kinds of interaction portrayed, interaction between siblings causes fewer problems and conflicts for children in these books. The one important element that disappears is the uncertainty of affection. Children in poems are insecure when they deal with friends or other groups of children, but relationships among siblings imply implicit closeness and affection is not challenged.

Outside the house, friendship is essential for children, and takes many forms. Their displays of affection are usually rather practical, and these children are very active: intimacy belongs to individual interactions, rather than group. Children's inner feelings are often confined to poems where they are alone or to lyrics where they are showed as streams of thought. Authors show how cautious children are about their feelings, and how self-conscious about finding and following "normal" behaviour. Children only feel free when they are alone: outside, they feel lost without a set of rules. The group can deeply influence their individual relationships too, if they attempt to stray from the norm. These authors always use one child as a speaking voice when they portray a group in a poem: this is important to underline and examine the complex relationship between the child and the group. The child can use the "we" pronoun when telling about something that happened to the group as a whole, but the group never speaks as one voice. The child acts as a spokesperson and gives his/her own personal version of the events.

Individual friendship is mainly the search for intimacy and a safe place outside the house. Interactions with a group follow a set of rules and the relationship with adults can be either frustrating or enriching: children look for a friend with whom they can create a safe haven and be themselves. These interactions imply underlying uncertainty: poems about best friends and first loves often mention fear of rejection. In these poems, authors show a deep empathy with children's vulnerable sides. Children feel vulnerable because

individual friendships are very flexible: friends can become enemies, and then go back to being friends. Children argue and make peace very easily.

Among the authors, Jackie Kay portrays the many nuances of individual interactions between children the most. Her characters often fall in love, and treat friendships as exclusive. They suffer when friends choose others over them; they do big gestures and fight a lot. One of the clearest examples is the speaking voice in the poem “Betrayed” from *Three Has Gone* [1994]:

Kathleen Baxter went off with Audrey Smythe
I stared at the walls of the playground.
Audrey had a nice long pony but a plain face
I couldn't understand what Kathleen saw in her.
[...]
At home I'd pretend to my diary Kathy and I
Were still best friends, and write down our day.
Then my mind would wander off to a special look
I saw earlier, being passed between Kathy and Audrey

Like a tiny dazzling silver ball, thrown and caught.
Those little smiles made me want to throw up. Yuck.
Ill, I took to bed. No one brought me *anything*.
'Dear Diary,' I wrote, 'K came to visit today

Brought a beautiful big bouquet.
She's worried to death I'm dying.'
So am I. I'm sure I am. That dreadful
Disease, what's-its-name? I have the symptoms.

[Kay 1994]

The feeling of exclusion is something all children seem to fear the most: they are possessive and dramatic. Jackie Kay believes in the complexity and strength of childhood relationships and feelings, and never underestimates her characters' pain. Her poems are lyrical and touching when they describe a lost friendship or love. Jackie Kay describes children's strongest feelings for one another.

Her children characters' friendships often prove very disappointing; they have very high expectations and idealise friendship. Their expectations are clear in the many poems she writes about imaginary friends and alter egos. Children create the ideal image of the friend they want, and play out their fantasies. An example is Carla Johnson: an imaginary alter ego who portrays how the real Carla would like to be. She is possibly a reflection of the identity issues caused by divorce, as the final poem of *Two's Company* suggests. The imaginary friend is the topic of the poem "Brendon Gallacher" from *Two's Company* [1992]:

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.
He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.
His father was in prison; he was a cat-burglar.
My father was a communist party full-time worker.
He had six brothers and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

[...]

One day when it was pouring and I was indoors,
My mum says to me, 'I was talking to Mrs Moir
Who lives next door to your Brendon Gallacher
Didn't you say his address was 24 Novar?
She says there are no Gallachers at 24 Novar

There never have been any Gallachers next door.'
And he died then, my Brendon Gallacher,
Flat out on my bedroom floor, his spiky hair,
His impish grin, his funny flapping ear.
Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher.

[Kay 1992]

The speaking voice of the poem builds up a complex and realistic portrait of an imaginary friend. This version is much less fairy-tale compared to Carla Johnson. The friend does not need to be a fairy-tale character, because the protagonist needs a friend who is her equal. The recurring anaphor of his name at the end of the lines in the first stanza reinforces the impression: Brendon Gallacher. The protagonist creates a complete history of her friend,

and she gives him a name, a family name and a detailed background. The reader does not understand that Brendon Gallacher is imaginary until the mother's revelation in the penultimate stanza. The illusion is so real to both the reader and the speaker Brendon does not simply disappear, or fade away: he dies on the bedroom floor.

The group is an important form of child relationship in the production of these poets, and the most influential in the lives of these children characters. Some authorities dictate the norm within the group, usually through example; usually, norms are flexible and unspoken. Children conform to those norms (or rather, dominant behaviours) because they need to be accepted. The most controversial side to these group dynamics is the group's tendency to be conservative. In Rosen's poem "Lizzie" from *Quick, Let's Get out of Here* [1983], the speaker does not confess his preference to a tomboy girl, because all the boys prefer more conventionally feminine girls:

Lizzie,
I'm afraid of saying
I think you're great

because, you see,
the teachers call you
tomboy.

I'm sorry
but I make out, as if
I agree with the teachers
and the other girls
wear bracelets
and I've noticed
they don't shout like you
or whistle,
and, you see,
the other boys
are always talking about

those girls
with the bracelets
so I do too.

[Rosen 1983]

Peer pressure here is largely self-imposed, as the boy does not know what would happen if he decided to make his feelings public. However, he is acutely aware of the deviation from the standard his thoughts imply. He does not muster the courage to affirm himself over the pressure of both his group's norm and the adults' conventions. This poem partly denounces the influence of adults who pass their narrow-mindedness on to children, directly or indirectly. It contradicts the idea of children as open and innocent, and shows how they imitate what they see. The group's influence inhibits individuality in this case. Outside the house, Rosen describes a world made of groups, where everyone has a role and follows some rules.

Jackie Kay takes this tendency further and describes forms of racism and bullying over or from her children characters. New people and strange behaviours disrupt this order and can be isolated, especially if they look different. To please friends, children can go against their own opinions and thoughts; they can also risk punishments by adults, especially their family. Outside the house, Kay's children can be nice and caring with their peers, but they can also be very mean. She writes about bullies a lot, and some of the stories come from her own experience. She explores both sides, and shows how some children become bullies as a reaction to the mistreatment they endure. The most unsettling feature of this kind of interactions is the irrelevance of adult intervention. Children hesitate to request help from adults, even where they are outnumbered and overpowered. She shows this behaviour in one of her most famous poems, "Duncan Gets Expelled" from *Two's Company* [1992]:

There are three big boys from primary seven
Who wait at the main school gate with stones
In their teeth and names in their pockets.

Every day the three big boys are waiting.
'There she is. Into her boys. Hey Sambo.'

I dread the bell ringing and the walk home.
My best friend is scared of them and runs off.
Some days they shove a mud pie in my mouth.
'That's what you should eat,' and make me eat it.
Then they all look in my mouth, prodding a stick.

I'm always hoping we get detention.
I'd love to write 'I will be better' 400 times.
The things I do? I pull Agnes MacNamara's hair.
Or put a ruler under Rhona's bum and ping it back
Till she screams; or I make myself sick in the toilet.

Until the day the headmaster pulls me out,
Asking all about the three big boys.
I'm scared to open my mouth.
But he says, 'you can tell me, is it true?'
So out it comes, making me eat the mud pies.

Two of them got lines for the whole of May.
But he got expelled, that Duncan MacKay.

[Kay 1992]

A group can be scary for some children: if they are alone to face it, help is often scarce or absent. The speaker here expresses impotence and loneliness. She is desperate, and she becomes a bully herself to avoid the problem. The reader might wonder if the three bullies in the poem are doing the same, if they are using violence as a coping strategy, venting frustration and unhappiness on an innocent target.

However, the group is not just a structure of control: it is also a protective and caring structure of socialisation. Children within the group feel safe; they look out for each other and have fun together. The group can be a nurturing

reality for these children. In addition, as in one-to-one interactions, most conflicts are short-lived: the structure is flexible. Most poems show children's games and adventures, and highlight the safety provided by the group structure. One example is "The line" from Michael Rosen's *You Wait 'Till I'm Older Than You!* [1997]. Here, a group of children faces mistreatment at the hands of a bitter teacher and a pompous headmaster; boys and girls are separated in the playground. At the heart of the poem, a group of boys expresses solidarity towards a German boy when the teacher takes his ball. Children in this poem form an unspoken alliance against adults who are being gratuitously mean:

'Give me that ball, Gunter,' she said, 'I want it.' Gunter didn't say anything. He just held on to it a bit harder, hugging it to his chest. He couldn't speak English. He'd only been in England a week or two and he was still wearing his yellow shoes.

Miss Wheelock prodded the Handball. 'Ball - Gunter - Ball.' Gunter hugged the Handball. Everyone else for miles and miles, right the way across the playground was standing still, right up as far as the climbing frame in the Nursery playground. No one talked.

So Miss Wheelock got her hands round the German's Handball and heaved on it. But he wouldn't let go. It was *his* Handball. Miss Wheelock and him were still heaving on it and she was still screaming. 'Ball - Gunter - ball,' when I booed.

And the moment /booed, Harrybo booed and all of us who had run all this way over the Line booed. But Miss Wheelock, who was bigger than Gunter, even though she was a tiny grown-up, actually got hold of the Handball and wrenched it out of Gunter's hands.

Gunter started gulping in big sobs but he didn't say anything. She turned on us and said, 'Never, never, never, in all my time -' when suddenly up the steps at the end of the Imaginary Line, came the Headmaster.

We stopped booing. The whole thing had got too big for booing. But he had seen what was going on. 'You,' he says, 'You - you - you - and you.' And, no trouble, he knew which ones of us to get, because we were standing there, the only boys out of the whole school, in girl-country.

The character of Gunter is a scapegoat, because he is a foreigner and cannot understand what goes on around him. The other boys sense his puzzlement and boo the teacher. However short, the rebellion is meaningful because we see children stick together against unfair adults. This poem is very long and has a prose structure, with no rhymes or sound effects. Stanzas have the structure of normal paragraphs in this narrative poem. Rosen recounts everything, from the line between boys and girls in the playground on the first day of school, to the accident with Gunter's ball that ends with the Headmaster canning all the boys who booed. The last line by the Headmaster is an ironic twist of events: "I'm putting this down in a book," he said, 'where

it will never be forgotten.” [Rosen 1997] It is exactly what Rosen does with the episode, and the effect on readers is obviously completely different from the Headmaster’s intention.

Contemporary poets also write about the first instances of romantic love in children and teenagers. The speaking voice is always the child who is experiencing love for the first times, and the first-person perspective gives us extensive insight on the sensation and feelings of the child. Love is often unrequited or never confessed, so these poems tend to show the tormented side. In many poems, it is an infatuation towards a friend. In this case, feelings usually remain unexpressed. The author who expands the most on this subject is Jackie Kay: romantic feelings during childhood and teenage years are one of her main theme. She explores many nuances of the subject: we have already seen her poem on the infatuation of a young girl for her teacher. Another lyric on romantic feelings is Kay’s poem “Summer Romance” from *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was An Opera Singer* [1998]:

I was best friends with Sabah
the whole long summer;
I admired her handwriting,
the way she smiled into
the summer evening,
her voice, melted butter.
The way her chin shone
under a buttercup.
Everyone let Sabah
go first in a long
hot summer queue.
The way she always looked
fancy, the way
she said 'Fandango',
and plucked her bango;
her big purple bangle
banged at her wrist;
her face lit by the angle

poise lamp in her room,
her hair all a tangle,
damp from the summer heat,
Sabah's eyes sparkled all summer.

But when the summer was gone
and the winter came,
in walked Big Heather Murphy.
Sabah turned her lovely head
towards her. I nearly died.
Summer holidays burn with lies.

[Kay 1998]

The poem is a long remembrance from a heartbroken child: the word romance immediately sets this as a love poem, rather than a lyric about betrayed friendship. The poem is made of memories of the time the speaker spent with her best friend, and the tone is sad and wistful. The presence of some important enjambments gives the poem a peculiar cadence. Some examples are “the way she smiled/into the summer evening”, “Everyone let Sabah/go first in a long/hot summer queue.”, “The way she always looked/fancy, the way/she said ‘Fandango’”, “her face lit by the angle/poise lamp in her room” [Kay 1998]. In many of these instances, the line cuts a proposition. The reader gets the impression that the speaker is crying and sobbing whilst she tells the events.

Only two lines contain complete sentences and convey all the meaning of this poem. “Sabah’s eyes sparkled all summer” [Kay 1998] closes the stanza devoted to summer memories: its prevailing sibilants and the light and warmth of the vowel sounds and lexicon (‘sparkled’, ‘summer’) bear the powerful feeling of regret for happy times. “Summer holidays burn with lies” [Kay 1998] gives the poem a drastic closure. Sibilants are still there, but lower vowel sounds and the powerfully negative image of ‘burn with lies’ destroy every happy image and memory.

Jackie Kay is also the poet that explores the topic of physical contact between children. In *Three Has Gone* [1994], we can find an innocent instance:

a girl who needs a rubber sheet to stay the night at a friend's home, because she wets the bed. The poem ends on a cheerful and accepting note: "now I know Charmaine wets the bed/we are close, /closer than before, close as sisters." [Kay 1994]. Jackie Kay expands on how children and teenagers perceive physical intimacy. In *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was An Opera Singer* [1998] we find the poem "Tommy MacCormack", that addresses – albeit covertly – the topic of sexual experimentation:

I was a good boy who needed a bad boy –
Tommy MacCormack.
Just the sound of his name made me bounce
My ball on the tarmac.
Tommy MacCormack.
My voice was different to his;
His was dirt and dust and slack,
Mine was high and squeaky clean.
I wished I could change my name to
Tommy MacCormack.
He said rude words, awful rude words,
I sucked till the colour changed on my tongue –
Shite! Swine! Or even the F word.
Tommy and his wide slow grin.

Nobody dared lift a finger to me,
When I was with Tommy MacCormack,
Nor call me swot or twack my back;
He had a real knack of making everyone do as he said
Did Tommy MacCormack.
He played me smoochy musak, Womack and Womack,
Ran his fingers down the length of my back,
Did a moonie round his wild room,
Lit a Regal, flicked his fringe,
Then did what he did best, my bad boy,
My Tommy MacCormack.

[Kay 1998]

The relationship between the two boys is a form of unbalanced friendship. The speaker starts by comparing himself to Tommy MacCormack. The speaking voice is a young and fragile boy in a difficult environment, whilst Tommy MacCormack is an ambiguously protective figure. The narrator shows extreme reverence towards this character. The repeated anaphora of his name stresses his importance, as in the poem “Brendon Gallacher”. The first stanza seemingly describes a friendship and maybe a form of infatuation from the speaking voice. The highly sensuous line about Tommy’s rude words is an example of his tough attitude that charms the protagonist: “I sucked till the colour changed on my tongue” [Kay 1998]. The second stanza goes further, and depicts consensual physical contact, instead of a one-way infatuation: “ran his fingers down the length of my back” [Kay 1998]. Whereas the content openly sexual, it is certainly very intimate. The last two lines are heavily suggestive and introduce a possessive adjective; the meaning seems obvious: “Then did what he did best, my bad boy, /my Tommy MacCormack” [Kay 1998]. In my selection, Jackie Kay is the only author who depicts the physical side to children’s interactions; this poem is a meaningful and deeply sensuous example.

A less controversial instance of love at a young age is the end of John Agard’s *Young Inferno* [2008]: love is the ultimate reward for the young protagonist’s journey through hell. However, love is also one of the main topics of the book, especially in “Canto 4”. In that Canto, Aesop and the young boy meet Frankenstein at the entrance of Hell’s Second Circle, “where the lovesick come to suffer twice” [Agard 2008]. The guide and Frankenstein mention a few couples that were condemned to Hell because of a sinful love. They warn the young protagonist against the dangers of unregulated feelings.

Aesop tells the tale of the lion who removes his own claws and fangs to impress the family of the woman he loves and ends up being chased away, “which goes to show how love can tame the wildest” [Agard 2008]. For Agard, love is the reward for our loss of childhood, the prize we earn when we grow up; however, love can be a damnation if we are not careful. By the end of the journey, a smiling Aesop leaves the boy with ‘the Good Fairy’. The boy emerges

from Hell in a library, and is fascinated by a beautiful girl, 'poetry in motion'. The ending of the book is love at first sight; this closure is unsatisfying compared to the rest of the writing. Love is described in a conventional and lyric way:

Oh, how I was lost in the orbit of Beatrice.
Was she for real, or some otherworldly
Vision from a daydreamer's kind of mist?

In the blinding light, she's the soothing dark.
In the dreaming dark, she's the hidden light.
She's the shadow who guides my inner spark.

I danced in the chemistry of her eyes
And I could have chilled out there for ever.
She made that library a paradise.

[Agard 2008]

Agard gives us a bucolic reading of teenage love, much more ethereal compared to Kay. The adult point of view is more evident here, and words are less poignant. Idealisation in poetry tends to be far from children's sensibility, and these words sound unnatural from a child speaker.

The poem “Boyfriends” from Michael Rosen’s *Quick, Let’s Get Out Of Here* [1983] provides an interesting contrast to Agard’s ethereal view with its down-to-earth calculations.

Christine Elkins said to me
under the oak tree
in the Memorial Park –
'I've got $2\frac{1}{2}$ boyfriends.'
 $2\frac{1}{2}$? I said. $2\frac{1}{2}$?'
'How do you work that out?'

'You, Harrybo, Timmy and Rodge,'
she said.
I thought for a moment...
'Me, Harrybo, Timmy and Rodge?
... 4!'
I was just about to say,
'But that makes 4 –'
when suddenly I thought,
'She has halves – HALF boyfriends!...
... 2 halves make one? No. 3 halves plus 1... y
'But, which ones are the halves?' I thought...
'and who's The One –
THE One?'

I never dared ask her
so I never found out.

The calculations make the poem funny and take out every possible dramatic note, especially for the visual presence of numbers and fractions. To children, love can be a game, and they play lightly and with no ill meaning, like Christine Elkins with her ‘half boyfriends’. However, the feelings involved are authentic, as we can see from the regret of the speaking voice, that wonders who is “The One” among the halves.

The many facets of sibling relations, friendship and love in children and teenagers portrayed by these authors show how complicated the parallel world of child interaction is. Adults are mostly absent, and rarely help children in their interactions with peers. Their intervention is only possible with a child’s permission. Poetry is the way through which these authors try to breach into that world. Their poems seem to address a double audience: they speak to children, aim at adults too, to help them understand their children’s life and interactions with others.

5. CONCLUSION

Children's poetry truly gives children their own voice when contemporary poets start holding poetry workshops in schools and teaching children how to write poetry. It is indubitable that poets crossed an important threshold and children take on an increasingly active role in poetry. The poet Ted Hughes addressed the subject of students and children trying their hands at poetry in his BBC program "Listening and Writing", that would go on to become the poetry handbook "Poetry in the Making" in 1967.

Children's poets have always assumed that children had the skills and sensibility to read poetry, so why should they not be able to write poetry too? Poets become artisans who explain their tools and techniques, and children are their apprentices. Teachers take on a role as mediators. During his time as a Poet Laureate, Michael Rosen promoted the project of a "Poetry Friendly Classroom", sharing resources for teachers on how to address poetry in the classroom. Resources are available on the children's laureate website, and range from video tips from Rosen and teachers, to selections of teaching sequences and poetry activities. Rosen's videos include tips to "create a poetry show" and "make poetry posters". An interesting example is a teaching sequence that draws on his poem "Don't" from *Mustard, Custard, Grumble Belly and Gravy* [2007]:

Write a poem based on 'Don't' (page 5)

Life is full of rules. Michael's poem contains a few that begin with 'don't'. Children are always being told what to do. Now it's their turn! These writing activities invite children to write their own **advice-poem** of 'do-rules' and 'don't-rules'.

The activity starts with the teacher reading the poem aloud and some brainstorming with the children: the teacher enquires what they are told to do and not to do more often, and how they would change it. Then it is their turn to write. The first activity is simple and straightforward: they need to write a poem of 'dos' and 'don'ts' addressed to parents, siblings or teachers. The other writing activity is designed to inspire their imagination:

Writing activity 2

• Ask pupils to write a poem of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ designed to help a friend in an unusual situation:

- they are made of glass
- they are wildly in love
- their hat is on fire
- they are turned into a flea
- they are sad
- they are a snowman
- they are an elephant in a supermarket
- they are about to stop a war
- they are walking a tightrope.

• Can pupils think of any more imaginary situations that might need rules?

• Ask pupils to choose one of these situations and think about the advice they would give their friend. They could start by making a list of the advice they would give, and then turn this into a poem.

[from: <http://www.childrenslaureate.org.uk/>]

The work includes tips on the use of rhymes and follow-up activities. Children are certainly thrilled to be the ones who make the rules, for a change.

So, how do children fare as active subjects in poetry? We can see a recent example in the remarkable book *Paint Me a Poem* [2004] by Grace Nichols. The poems are all inspired by art at the museum, and were written during the poet’s year residency at the Tate Gallery: some are by Nichols, others by children from primary schools. According to the author, “some of the children had never visited an art gallery before and their responses to the works were as fresh as their curiosity about the gallery space” [Nichols, 2004].

'The painting Waterfall' by Ashile Gorky is the subject of two poems:



Waterfall
Water letting
Her waterfall-hair down
Waterfall dancing
To her waterfall-sounds
Waterfall dressed-up
Every colour under the sun
Waterfall inviting
Whistles of bird-call
Waterfall blowing
Foamy kisses to one and all

I think Waterfall must be
Making her own carnival

Grace Nichols

Magic Waterfall
It is a bizarre day
All things that I see are multi-coloured,
A pool of water;
White mountains of snow frozen,
Green and gold forests of wonder.
A woman bathing under a magical
Waterfall,
Her peachy skin reflects the sun.
She can see a frog with a beard,
A small goat, as tiny as her hand.
Is she dreaming?
Maybe she is under the waterfall
To drown.

Neneh

Gloucester Primary

The child's imagination is rather figurative, as he writes a poem about human figures and animals, mountains and forests. The child describes an immense landscape and includes a mysterious woman. The picture is dreamy and surreal. The child shows awareness of poetical devices such as enjambments, and he plays with the structure of the poem. The poem by Grace Nichols is much more abstract, and stays true to what we see on the painting. She plays with sounds and suggestions such as "whistles of bird-call" and the humanising of the waterfall "blowing kisses". We can see here that an abstract painting allows children for complete freedom of interpretation.

With figurative paintings, the results are different. An example is the poem "Wondering WHY?" inspired by the painting "The Last Day in the Old Home" by Robert Braithwaite Martineau:



My father is happy on the outside,
Sad on the inside.
All his debts have caught up,
There is nowhere to hide.

I am learning to drink wine.
My dad is acting
As if everything is fine.

My sister is in the corner,
Having a little cry,
And I am wondering
WHY?

Sam Leo

Marion Richardson Primary

The child knows the content of the painting, and the emotions in the poem are in line with that. The writing is less free, and gives the impression that the child knows on some level what is expected from him. The results seem to suggest that children poets are as concerned about their audience as adult poets.

Ultimately, putting children in touch with poetry and encouraging them to write poetry responds to a primary adult need: the need to know children. Contemporary authors recognise them as a separate category from adults; the children's world is out of their reach. We cannot possibly know children, but we cannot leave them alone either. Poets build bridges and try to make contact with children and teenagers to overcome this gap: it is an endless chase and all children's poetry contributes to it. Contemporary children's poets focus on children's relationships to give them a different perspective: children who struggle to communicate with their parents can find it comforting to read that parents have problems too. Children who write take another, important step: poetry can help them convey their own feelings, opinions and point of view on the world. Children's poets provide both children and adults with an instrument to communicate across an invisible, yet real threshold.

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