

Stories

A skinny little boy, about four years old, rode his tricycle down Manor Hill Drive, in Clifton. His bike hit a curb. He tumbled off. He landed on his right shoulder . He heard a crack then felt the pain, a broken collarbone. He remembered going to the hospital. He remembered going home to recuperate under the loving care of a beautiful 27 year old woman, it was his mother.

She read to him often as he recuperated. He listened. He remembered the stories. He remembers them even to this very evening at the Literary Club. Each of you will recognize most of the stories but you may not know their hidden meanings.

My focus this evening will be Nursery Rhymes and for the most part their hidden meanings, their back- stories.

You know it's almost presumptuous to bring a paper about stories to a story telling Literary Club. In our club house we revel in myths, and legends, in fables and epics, in biographies and essays and memoirs. But tonight we will unravel the secret meanings of the rhymes, their back stories.

Rub a dub dub
Three men in a tub
And how do you think they got there
The butcher, the baker
And the candlestick maker.
They all came out of a p'tater
Twas enough to make a man stare.

The back story is that the original verse read Rub a dub dub
Three maids in a tub (not men)
With the butcher, the baker and the candle stick maker.
Twas enough make a man stare.

Tubs were a common sight at county fairs. Were the maids in the tub covered with soapy bubbles like in today's movies. If

the maids were actually in the tub who knows what action there may have been? It was indeed enough to make a man stare.

Here is another rhyme we all know:

Bah, bah black sheep

Have you any wool?

Yes sir, yes sir,

Three bags full.

One for the master

One for the dame

And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.

This rhyme refers to the wool tax of 1275 imposed by King Edward the 1st . The tax required a one third allotment to the Church, one third to King Edward I and finally one third to the little boy who was the one raising the sheep for the wool. So the families that produced the wool unfairly received only one third of the results of their work.

Goosey Gander has its back- story.

Goosey, goosey gander
Where shall I wonder,
Upstairs and downstairs
And in my lady's chamber

There I met an old man
Who wouldn't say his prayers.
So I took him by the left leg
And threw him down the stairs.

The term for prostitute was a goose like Goosey, goosey gander. To be bitten by a "goose" resulted in a goose bump, venereal disease which may have been carried into the lady's chamber. Or the "geese" the prostitutes, were smuggled into the chamber for a waiting suitor. Perhaps the "old man that wouldn't say his prayers really just refused to pay the prostitutes. We have to make our own interpretations.

Prostitution seemed to be a rather busy trade during this time.

Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it
Not a penny was there in it
Only ribbons round it.

Lucy and Kitty were well known high class prostitutes. Lucy lost her good client (her pocket) to Kitty, but the client had not a penny .

Kitty was not of the manor born. In her early years, a favorite place for the King. She worked up through society via various bed chambers. Kitty was by all counts a beautiful women, and ambitious. She was beautiful enough to marry well to an MP, a Member of Parliament. Her portrait was hung in London's famous National Portrait Gallery where it can be seen today.

Remember this one:

Old Mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard
To fetch her poor dog a bone.
When she got there
The cupboard was bare
So the poor little doggie got none.

It has King Henry VIII seeking authority for a divorce through the intercession of the renowned Cardinal Wolsey who is the Old Mother Hubbard in the rhyme. Wolsey was the most important statesman and churchman of the Tudor history period in the 16th Century. Wolsey remained faithful to his Catholic Church refusing to get permission for Henry to marry Ann Boleyn

The cupboard was bare. No annulment! Permission for the annulment was subsequently granted by Thomas Cramer resulting in the break with Rome and the initial establishment of the English Protestant Church.

Now here comes Cardinal Wolsey again:

Little Boy Blue come blow your horn,
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn.
But where's the boy who looks after the sheep?
He's under the haystack fast asleep.
Will you wake him? No, not I—for if I do he's sure to cry.

This rhyme is about Cardinal Wolsey who often blew his own horn and acquired great wealth represented by many flocks of sheep and herds of cows. He paid little attention to the good of the King and thus is portrayed as fast asleep.

While he wore scarlet robes his emblem pictured four blue leopards, thus little boy blue. His entire estate was confiscated by Henry VIII so certainly when he wakes up he will cry.

The reign of King Henry the 8th provided fertile ground for Nursery Rhymes with hidden, subtle meanings. This King was an educated man skillful in all of the physical sports. He

had no trouble finding wives, and as everyone knows he had six wives. The Catholic Pope Clement would not grant an annulment to Henry so he could not marry Ann Boleyn. The Pope wrote a letter to Henry forbidding him to remarry under penalty of excommunication.

King Henry ignored the letter. Instead he founded his own church, the Church of England, so he could marry any women worthy and attractive. And so he did.

Henry's first wife was Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain were both dedicated Catholics.

Let's look at the back- story for:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary

How does your garden grow?

With silver bells and cockle shells

And maidens all in a row.

Mary the daughter of Henry the 8th and Catherine of Aragon became the English staunch Catholic Queen.

Mary, is quite contrary because she was a Catholic contrary to the Protestant religion established by her father. She acquired the soubriquet Bloody Mary represented in the rhyme by “how does your garden grow” obliquely referring to the large number of deaths Mary caused, adding to her garden.

We think of silver bells like the Lilly’s of the Valley and Cockle Shells as the real flowers that they are.

What is the hidden meaning?

Silver bells were thumbscrews of torture put around a thumb then tightened down and down. Cockle shells were also instruments of torture. They were attached around male genitals then tightened, and tightened.

Then “maidens all in a row.” We think of lovely ladies standing row. Maidens were the name for the early version of

the chop off your head machines later in France
eponymously the Guillotine.

There were often two or more versions of behind the scenes
interpretations. In Mary Mary the Catholic interpretation was
the “silver bells signified the bells rung in church. The
cockleshells represented the badges worn by pilgrims and
the maidens represented the nuns in the chapel.

Protestant writers wrote that the poem was a lament at the
reinstatement of the Catholic Church.

Ring around the rosie, pocketful of posies, ashes, ashes, we all
fall down.”

Roses were a euphemism for people deadly red rashes which
formed in the shape of a circle on the skin of those with the
disease. The cause was the great bubonic plague of London
and England in 1655. The death rate was over 60% which
was ended only by the Great London Fire which killed all of
the rats that had passed the disease along in the water.

The example of the hidden meaning was not at all uncommon. In fear of serious retribution, rhymes were used in place of what were essentially diatribes which if plainly stated would have had serious repercussions and bad results.

Then how about this one! Are you ready?

Three blind mice,
See how they run.
They all ran after the farmers wife.
She cut of their tails with a carving knife
Did you ever see such a sight in your life as
Three blind mice”

The group of three were Protestant Bishops, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Radley and the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas

Cranmer who unsuccessfully tried to overthrow this Queen Mary. They were all three burned at the stake. Their blindness refers to their religious beliefs.

Any number of Nursery Rhymes have back-stories but have the additional purpose of being attractive for children.

Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock, the clock struck one, and down he come , hickory dickory dock, or

Itsy bitsy spider
Ran up the water spout
Down came the rain and
Washed the spider out.
Out came the sun
And washed away the rain away so
Itsy bitsy spider ran up the spout again.

Little miss Muffet sat on a Tuffet
Eating her curds and whey;

Along came a spider
And sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Miss Muffet's father was a well known arachnid specialist.
The spider was probably just a runaway from her father's
array.

Or

Jack be nimble
Jack be nimble
Jack be quick
Jack jump over the candlestick

These verses made them quite popular because of the finger
movements.

Here is another famous rhyme:

Bah, bah black sheep
Have you any wool?

Yes sir, yes sir,
Three bags full.
One for the master
One for the dame
And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.

This rhyme refers to the wool tax by King Edward the 1st who ruled from 1272 to 1307. The tax required a one third allotment to the Church, one third to King Edward I and finally one third to the little boy who was the one raising the sheep for the wool. So the families that produced the wool unfairly received only one third of the results of their work.

Here's another

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.

The roots of this rhyme are set in France. Jack who is King Louis XVI "broke his crown", which was actually his

beheading. Jill, who is Marie Antoinette, was killed the same day also by the guillotine. This French king reigning from 1774 to 1792 substantially supported the American Revolution sending Lafayette to the US.

Here is another rhyme with a hidden meaning.

Georgie Porgie puddin and pie
Kissed the girls and made them cry
And when the girls came out to play
Georgie Porgie ran away.

George was George de Villiers, the 1st Duke of Buckingham who had a notorious affair with Anne of Austria, at that time the Queen of France and married to the French King Louis XII. This affair was featured in the novel Three Musketeers by Alexander Dumas.

In England King James the 1st took George Villiers who may have changed, as his lover. Villiers good looks also appealed

to the ladies. George was disliked by almost everyone except King James who allowed Georgie Porgie “many liberties.”

London Bridge is falling down falling down, falling down
London Bridge is falling down
My fair lady.

London bridge is built with stone, built with stone, built with
stone, London Bridge is built with stone,
My fair lady.

My fair lady refers to London Bridge itself.

This rhyme goes on and on for over 20 more verses many quite boring so I will just skip the remainder verses.

Sing a Song of Sixpence . This is another good example of rhymes portraying other meanings:

Sing a song of sixpence
A pocket full of rye

Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing
Now wasn't that a dainty dish
To set before the king.

The king was in the counting house
Counting out his money
The queen was in the parlor
Eating bread and honey.
The maid was in the garden
Hanging out her clothes
When along came a blackbird
And snipped off her nose.

This rhyme is dated in the 16th century from the time of Henry the 8th. The King, in the rhyme is Henry VIII who is counting his money. The Queen, Catherine of Aragon is in the parlor eating bread and honey.

Ann Boleyn who is pictured as the maid out in the garden hanging out her clothes, being as attractive as she can be for

the watching King. Ann Boleyn managed to marry the King but later he had her executed. The blackbirds were the helping priests in their black cassocks. Her nose and in fact her life were snipped off.

Nursery rhymes have a certain spell, an inscrutable magic as to where they come from, travelling in time over hundreds of years. We know them, we recite them or read them to our children, and grandchildren and beyond.

There is much more to learn about nursery rhymes. Some are real facts like London Bridge. Those of interest use seemingly innocent rhymes to parody political and historical events of the day. By this process subversive messages of discontent would be innocently disbursed. In those times words of dissent, or of direct criticism of powerful people may have been rewarded with punishment, sometimes torture or even death.

Nursery Rhymes have their own way of growing up leaving behind those of us that memorize and read with pleasure these enduring Nursery Rhymes.

This rhyme is about Robert Walpole the first Earl of Oxford. He is regarded as the very first Prime Minister of England and the first occupier of #10 Downing St. He had the self-confidence and the ability to move both the emotions and the minds of the English. This is a lovely poem reflecting Walpole's life.

Who Killed Cock Robin?

I said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow.

Who saw him die?

I, said the fly, with my little eye

I saw him die.

Who caught his blood

I, said the fish, in my little dish.

I caught the blood.

Who will make the shroud?

I, said the beetle
With my thread and needle
I 'll make the shroud.

Who'll dig the grave?
I said the owl, with my pick and trowel
Who'll be the parson?
I said the rook, with my little book
I'll be the parson.

Who'll be the clerk?
I said the lark. If it's not in the dark/
I'll be the clerk.

Who will carry the shroud said the linnet,
I'll fetch it in a minute
I'll carry the shroud..

Who'll be the chief mourner?
I said the dove,
I mourn for my love,

I'll be the chief mourner.

Who'll carry the coffin?

I said the Kite if its not through the night.

I'll carry the coffin.

Who'll bear the pall?

We said the wren, both cock and hen.

We'll bear the pall.

Who will sing the psalm

I said the thrush as she sat on a bush

I'll sing the psalm.

Who'll toll the bell?

I said the bullfinch because I can pull .

I'll toll the bell.

All the birds of the air fell a sighing and a sobbing,

When they heard the bell toll for poor cock robin.

Here is a subversive nursery rhyme of our day which is hated by one group and loved by another:

Hey Donnie, Donnie up in your tower
Lookin' out with a glower
'Cause you lost all of your power.
Hey Donnie, Donnie, watching the foxes,
Sleeping with doxies,
And hiding those boxes.

Hey Donnie, Donnie down in the dumps
Still taking your lumps
'Cause Joey came up trumps.

Finally this lovely verse is unusual because we do know the name of the writer. Here it is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow , written while he was carrying his fretful small baby in his arms:

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl

Right in the middle of her forehead.

When she was good she was very, very good

And when she was bad she was horrid.

The Nursery Rhymes are over. It's time to go to sleep.

Lady bird, lady bird fly away home.

Harry H. Santen October 3, 2022