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## Playful Encounters in the Garden of Poetry: Children's Poetry and Play

*Poiesis, in fact, is a play-function.*  
Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

**Abstract:** Poetry is heavily invested with playfulness. Drawing on the most recent critical discourse on children's poetry, the present study aims to showcase that the significant form of play can be manifested in many ways in children's poetry and also be traced in poetic language as playful humor and intense verbalplay. For this purpose, a cluster of poems are addressed, poems been found in poetic anthologies for children ("Overheard on a Saltmarsh"), in the street ("Bam Chi Chi La La: London, 1969") in the playground ("I scream...") and in single-poet collections ("Jamie Dodgers aren't the only fruit", "Skig the Warrior"). All poems reveal some of the essential qualities of children's poetry and most importantly its overall playful character materialized both in linguistic and conceptual terms. The children's poem "Come on into my tropical garden" written by the British-Caribbean poet Grace Nichols is closely analyzed as a manifestation of poetry's playful spirit. The exuberance of its rhetoric and sound, its rhythmical feeling and the rich texture of its verses are conveyed through a well-embodied structure and form. What is more, the poem is thoroughly permeated by play as a core element both in the-matics and figurative language. The poet uses and reappropriates the "garden" as a powerful metaphor for children's poetry, placing the child at the very center of a symbolic natural landscape to celebrate nature's delights and to exercise her insatiable appetite for play.

**Keywords:** children's poetry, play, Huizinga, garden-as-metaphor, Grace Nichols

### INTRODUCTION: ASKING THE QUESTION

What is poetry? There are as many definitions of poetry as there are people. It might be argued that the most decisive aspect of poetry is its resistance to be defined, labeled, or pinned down. We all know how poetry sounds and feels, and we can recognize a poem when we hear one, reading it aloud or reading its lines in the printed page. However, it might be difficult for us to explain, or to offer a

detailed account of what exactly *is* poetry and what might be its meaning, its effect, or its significance in our lives. Very often, poetry is defined as a special kind of language that does innovative things with words, sound, rhythm and pattern, features that are a constant source of our pleasure and our understanding of the poem. We might even understand a poem as much by feeling its rhythms and hearing its sounds as by grasping its clusters of meanings, yet we may not be able to express our understanding of it to others. Poems have various and different effects on us. Some of them seem very compelling, perplexed, or even obscure, prompting great chains of thoughts when we seek to communicate with them. Some others have a mesmerizing effect and we just want to keep enjoying their rhythms, listening to their sounds, and getting absorbed into the satisfying, sensual and mental, experience they offer to us. At the same time, we have a reciprocal effect on the poem when reading it; we actually *transform* the poem in many ways as we are responding to it in the same way the poem *transforms us* having an impact on our thought. As Michel Charles has shown, a text acts on the reader, and in turn, the reader acts on and within the text (Charles, 1977: 63). According to this view, poems are neither autonomous and self-contained entities, nor objects completely constructed by the reader. Of course, the relationship between the reader and the poem has been long and exhaustingly analyzed. There are various approaches in the field of reader-response /reading theory that differ from each other, especially when it comes to deciding whether more weight should be given to the reader or the text and to what extent one depends on the other. However, all theories emphasize the close, reciprocal relationship between text and reader and their mutual synergy in the process of meaning-making. They also all agree that neither the poem is a finished product, nor the reader is neutral and stable. The poem is historically changing, contingent, and open to interpretation, anticipating further action on the reader's part; the reader, on the other hand, is a complex figure that takes on various guises, including different interpretative perspectives as well as different identities through and across time. As P.B. Shelley famously suggested in *A Defense of Poetry*, poetry is defined every time a poem is written, and every time a poem is read:

A great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted of all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. (Shelley, 1840: 5; quoted by Williams, 2009: 6)

#### DEFINING CHILDREN'S POETRY

The question 'What children's poetry is' might seem equally perplexing and challenging to be easily and straightforwardly answered, although it might be considered one of the most essential questions that could be asked in the

field of children's literature theory. Definitions of children's poetry in themselves have generated debates with opposing views and considerations about the nature of such poetry. It is undoubtedly true that it is difficult to offer a once and for all definition of children's poetry even more so that both childhood and poetry are socially constructed and therefore not static terms. Many chapters in the volume *Poetry and Childhood* (Styles, Joy & Whitley, 2010: 1–44), for instance, ask fundamental questions about what might constitute children's poetry, its function or the features it might contain. More recent scholarly contributions (Wakely-Mulroney and Joy, 2018) offer insightful accounts to the nature and the aesthetics of children's poetry. However, according to some scholars like Pat Pinsent (2016: 90) the whole question of what actually constitutes a children's poem still remains an unresolved matter and open to debate.

Despite the divergent views related to the nature and the suitability of poetry for children, common ground can –and has been found– towards the definition of its fundamental structure and significance. Regarding to its limits, Morag Styles (2010: xii) argues convincingly that children's poetry includes not only what is written for children but also “all those poems appropriated, begged, borrowed or stolen from the adult canon for the pleasure of children”, while the field can also be defined to “poems expressly written for children, or published for children, or both” (Pullinger, 2017: 6). These definitions are adequately broad to cover the phenomenon of border-crossing that is frequent in anthologies of children's poetry (many of them include poems not originally written for children), but also the more rare practice the poet to include some of their poems to both their adult and children's collections. The poet Grace Nichols is such a case. Some of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) for example have been included to her children's collection *Come on into my Tropical Garden* (1988).

Karen Coats not only points out the contradictions that inform the existing critical discourse on children's poetry (Coats, 2010; 2013: 127–142), but also offers a detailed account of what poetry is and what it means for children. She argues convincingly that “children's poetry is what it does” (Coats, 2013: 132) and that “a children's poem is one that creates a holding environment in language to help children manage their sensory environments, map and regulate their neurological functions, and contain their existential anxieties” (Coats, 2013: 140). She highlighted the fundamental function of children's poetry to preserve the rhythms and pleasures of the body in language and to facilitate emotional and physical attunement with others. Combining strong prosodic elements with meaningful content and being at the same time a communal and a communicative art, children's poetry offers an inescapable sensory, imaginative, and emotional experience to the child.

Pullinger (2017) has offered the most extensive and detailed theoretical exploration of children's poetry so far, combining different epistemological per-

spectives in the study of its field. Drawing primarily upon orality-literacy theory and neuroscience, she provided a compelling new account of children's poetry as a multimodal art which is "shaped by the dynamics of orality and textuality and by the interplay between them" (2017: 231). She highlighted the resiliency of children's poetry on sound and the human voice and its affinity with orality. The poem is an artifact of "tactful language" (2017: 56), she argues, to be performed and grasped through the ear, the tongue and the voice, but at the same time is a spatial object on the page to be looked at and accommodated by the reader's eye and mind. The visual aspect of the poem (as it appears on the printed page in various shapes, forms, and layouts) produces interesting effects in the level of semantics and influences the way the poem is read. In general, not only the poem's material embodiment on the page has a great impact on the process of poetic apprehension and meaning-making, but also its acoustic-performative characteristics.

Generally speaking, children's poetry involves an openness of body, heart, and mind, an active, participatory attitude towards it so that its true, embodied experience comes to fruition. Poetry's oral, visual and corporeal dimensions are simultaneously illustrated in a practice of reading that was in use for centuries after the invention of the technology of the Greek alphabet (Havelock, 1991: 24–25) and it is still something that struggling readers (or semi-literate people) do instinctively when come to terms with a text: they use to pronounce the words by the lips as they read it, following sometimes the printed lines with their fingers. What I am trying to suggest is that this practice might be an inadvertently appropriate way of experiencing the poem in all its aspects. Somehow we ought to feel the poem "trippingly on the tongue" (*Hamlet*, act. 3. sc. 2) and to take it into us, mind and body, and, as often as we can, to read the poem aloud and to perform it "in a tactile and whole body fashion" (Bland, 2015: 95). The children's poet A.F. Harrold in the blurb of his collection *Things You Find in a Poet's Beard* (2015) invites the young readers to stand up and "shout" the poems, to "chuckle at them under the covers with a torch", in general to experience the poems wholeheartedly and with all senses on alert.

In the light of the argument above it might be said that a poem (children's or not) do not really exist without its recipient (reader or performer); in other words, without a person (or a group of people) to infuse life into it through body, voice, and mind. In other words, the poem is to be viewed in relation to its effect on the reader, and, reciprocally, to the reader's effect on it. It is not a sterilized entity located into the ivory tower; it belongs to the living environment and it is surrounded by societal, both domestic and public, circumstances. A poem, after all, might be a fleeting vibration in the air (in Homeric epics *epea pteroenta*, i.e. *winged words*) and, simultaneously, a permanent set of letters and visual shapes on the page. Whatever its particular features are, the poem usually is experienced by the reader in its reciprocal combination of oral and textual elements.

## A HANDFUL OF GLASS BEADS

As a person who has spent years of my professional life in an effort to compile poetic anthologies for young readers, I feel compelled to make a special reference to the role of poetic anthologies in introducing poetry to young people and in enriching, according to my view, the actual field of the poetry in question. Nicola Watson suggests that “the hybrid and miscellaneous nature of the category of poetry for children, showcased in the form of the anthology, (...) has been the real barrier to thinking of such poetry in generic terms” (Maybin & Watson, 2009: 200). As I see it, poetic anthologies are culturally and pedagogically important products which showcase the flexibility, the cross-over appeal and the remarkable wideness of children’s poetry. It is not accidental that numerous poetic anthologies have been published over the centuries (Styles, 2009: 235–245) under a different premise and keep coming in abundance almost dominating the relevant market. It might seem more likely for a young reader to engage with poetry via an anthology than via a single-poet collection. With their eclectic and digressive character and their attractive layout, anthologies have proved not only a favorable and enduring reading choice but also a challenging endeavor for everyone who has been involved in their making.

As any reader of poetic anthologies might have noticed, in almost any given collection of children’s poetry the texts anthologized reflect a miscellaneous and diverse conception of poetry, and they are usually very different to each other in terms of type and tradition, stylistic features, themes, or diction of the selected poems. For example, many children’s anthologies include poems that are not originally written for children along with poems specifically written and addressed to them, or bring together canonical authors with contemporary ones and poets who represent different generic traditions. Very often the method of selecting poems for an anthology is highly subjective and reflects the personal taste of the editor – even more so if the compiler of the volume is a significant insider: Who would not want to know which the favorite poems of the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy (2012) are? Or what are the best children’s poems according to Michael Rosen? (2009). Who would not want to know which poems the popular writer Jaqueline Wilson would choose to include to a poetry anthology for girls – her primary target audience? The latter’s anthology *Green Glass Beads. A Collection of Poems for Girls* takes its title by Wilson’s most favorite school poem, namely “Overheard on a Saltmarsh” (1920) by Harold Monro – a classic poem which appears frequently in anthologies for children (Duffy, 2003: 102–3; Duffy, 2012: 149–50; Donaldson, 2013: 102–3). In her foreword to the volume, Wilson explains that the aforementioned poem fascinated her imagination when she was a pupil. The poem consists of an imaginary dialogue between a goblin and a nymph quarreling over a handful of green glass beads. Structured on the often used in children’s poetry form of a “conversation” (Jeffries, 2009: 230) is perfect for reading aloud so that its

whimsical tone and its rhymes, its acoustic quality and the interspersed voices come together in an utterly captivating unit<sup>1</sup>. The poem, which might be read as a fragment of a high fantasy narrative, can conjure up colorful images to the mind; therefore it might be extremely appealing to the reader's imagination – it is not surprising that it has proved a favorite choice for anthologies and a favorite childhood poem for both Carol Ann Duffy and Jacqueline Wilson. It is a fanciful, fantasy poem and yet an utterly familiar one; the two fantastic creatures, the nymph and the goblin, are presented as two ordinary children who play among nature and quarrel over a favorite toy.

Nymph, nymph, what are your beads?  
 Green glass, goblin. Why do you stare at them?  
 Give them me.  
 No.  
 Give them me. Give them me.  
 No.  
 Then I will howl all night in the reeds,  
 Lie in the mud and howl for them.  
 Goblin, why do you love them so?  
 They are better than stars or water,  
 Better than voices of winds that sing,  
 Better than any man's fair daughter,  
 Your green glass beads on a silver ring.  
 Hush, I stole them out of the moon.  
 Give me your beads. I want them.  
 No.  
 I will howl in a deep lagoon  
 for your green glass beads, I love them so.  
 Give them me. Give them me.  
 No.

The same poem can also be found in *The New Faber Book of Children's Poems* edited by the Irish poet Matthew Sweeney (2003: 93). This edition is another example of an anthology whose material has been drawn up from across disparate and variant sources and it gathers together poets as diverse as William Shakespeare, Samuel T. Coleridge, Lewis Carroll, Algernon Charles Swinburne, e.e. cummings, Shel Silverstein, John Agard, Carol Ann Duffy, or Simon Armitage. The anthology provides the reader with a rich repository of poems that employ a wide range of forms, styles, and topoi. Obviously, the anthologizing process, inevitably related to the editor's notion of what constitutes a suitable and appealing children's poem, produces an enormously variable poetic corpus, a corpus however which allows the young readers to take advantage of such variety, either the poems are written explicitly for them or not.

<sup>1</sup> The platform YouTube gives the reader the opportunity to watch and hear Wilson reading aloud the poem in an expressive and colorful manner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04TW5FUNi7s>.

## POETRY IS ALL AROUND US

Poetry in its strong association with language- play and music could be found and thoroughly enjoyed in many different forms and manifestations, not only in school environments but also, and even more importantly, outside the classroom's sphere and beyond the teacher's influence. It is commonly accepted that poetry can be traced to almost any social environment in human life. A chameleon-like notion, can take many disguises. It appears in all kinds of printed pages, like in books and in cards<sup>2</sup>, on the screen and in the street (i.e. in the Underground; Benson, Chernaik & Herbert, 2006), in CDs, in audiobooks and in vinyl discs where it takes primarily the form of a song. It is infused in chants, riddles, and lullabies and it can also be transformed into a complex "image-text" (Mitchell, 1994: 89) when it appears concretely combined with pictures in the multimodal form of the poetry picturebook (Neira-Piñero, 2016: 1–19). As many scholars, critics or educators have strongly and in many ways emphasized, children have actually plenty of opportunities to engage in poetic discourse and creative wordplay even before their first poetry lesson. Kornei Chukovsky and his seminal book *From Two to Five* (1971<sup>2</sup>) is the classic example of a study that has foregrounded the natural inclination of the pre-school children for playing with language and composing poetic verbal pieces in the most spontaneous way, even by making fun of their verbal 'mistakes' and slips of the tongue.

Poetry can also be traced in the rich depository of oral tradition and folk culture. It can be found in the riddles, jeers, incantations, and jump-rope rhymes that children of all ages use to sing to accompany their play outside classrooms. Poetry is also the nursery rhymes they know from the cradle or the poetry they might write at home, or the popular songs, the rap lyrics and beats, and the TV jingles they listen to, enjoy, and sometimes memorize in their everyday lives. Children and adults encounter poetry every day.

One of the most unexpected places to meet poetry is the Underground and yet the tradition of circulating poems via public transport is quite long. The poem *Bam Chi Chi La La: London, 1969*, which I use as an example, appeared in Tube train carriages across London in 2013 (and again in 2015). It is written by the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison and it describes the dreams of a migrant teacher from Jamaica who works as a charwoman in the West End. The title refers to a popular Jamaican children's rhyme.

In Jamaica she was a teacher. Here, she is charwoman  
at night in the West End. She eats a cold midnight meal

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the series *Poetry instead of a card*. Each piece in the series includes one poetry pamphlet, envelope and coordinating bookmark with space for a personalized message. The series features interesting titles such as *Ten Poems of Kindness*. Selected and introduced by Jackie Kay, London: Candlestick 2017.

carried from home and is careful to expunge her spice trail with Dettol. She sings 'Jerusalem' to herself and recites the Romantic poets as she mops hallways and scours toilets, dreaming the while of her retirement mansion in Mandeville she is building brick by brick.

The traditional children's rhyme that gives the poem its title might be seen as belonging to a rather marginalized genre: as a Jamaican children's rhyme echoes a past of colonial rule, it is closely associated with a peripheral geographical region (compared to metropolitan London) and it is a genre with strong domestic and informal associations as it is usually transmitted from mouth to mouth between siblings and members of a community. If the rhyme is considered marginalized then it might be not accidental that it has been literally marginalized in the poem having been expelled to the title. To put it differently, the *Bam Chi Chi La La* rhyme belongs to the threshold of the poem that is, to use Genette's (1987) terminology, the paratext (paratexte) of the text. As a paratextual feature, however, the title is indented to direct the way the poem is to be perceived by the reader. First of all, the title of the poem signifies a powerful ironic tension by creating a peculiar syntagmatic sequence; there is no obvious meaningful connection between the signifiers *Bam Chi Chi La La* and *London, 1969* since they belong to apparently disparate semantic spheres and correspond to totally distinct referents. The specific title wording, it seems, brings together and juxtapose, in a likewise surreal manner, two discreet signs with different connotations, and two discreet realities: the title of a Jamaican children's rhyme signaling possibly the remote childhood past of an immigrant, and the name of an urban metropolis with the chronology 1969, a year until which, it should be noticed, Britain had received thousands of immigrants from the West Indies. The specific chronology launches the reader at a period (1948-1970) when, due to the shortage of workers in Britain, thousands of West Indians, all British citizens, were invited to live and work in Britain, if they wanted to. However, if the reader wants to make sense of the title she must refer to the extra-textual historical context of the poem.

The main body of the poem is punctuated by references to other poems (performed orally by the woman) which however represent totally opposing qualities: they are canonical, long-established, and British, written by great authors such as the Romantics and W. Blake (in whose verses the hymn "Jerusalem" is based). What is more, the referred poems are for adults and, undoubtedly, they carry complicated meanings, while the *Bam Chi Chi La La* rhyme seems nothing more than a boisterous, nonsensical poem for children. Moreover, the reference of the playful children's rhyme in the title (and nowhere else in the poem) creates a painful antithesis between the past and the present, between the carefreeness of the woman as a child and her current suppressing and tiresome reality. Except for the fact that she does not live in a suitable place, we may assume that she was forced to accept a job which she was over-qualified for and that she has been facing circumstances of discrimination and oppression. And yet she must carry



on. However, poetry is essential for the woman's everyday life and we may suppose that helps her to cope with the circumstances and not to forget her love for literature. Her predilection for the specific works in English might be related to her early experiences with reading British literature, her professional education as a teacher and her religious personality in general. The poem can be read as a realistic uncompromising account of a female's immigrant experience in 1969 London and also as an account of poetry in general, its different manifestations and the important role it plays in a person's life.

Usually the reader, having read the poem, refers back to the title to see how it further relates to the poem. Returning to the significant paratext, we may ask does the melodic *Bam Chi Chi La La* effect achieved in the title underscore the gloominess of the woman's reality, or does its sing-song quality counter the poem's bleakness, creating a rift to the painful poetic world? Although I would rather privilege the first option, the students with whom I discussed the poem taught me that the title is inherently ambivalent and open to many interpretations<sup>3</sup>.

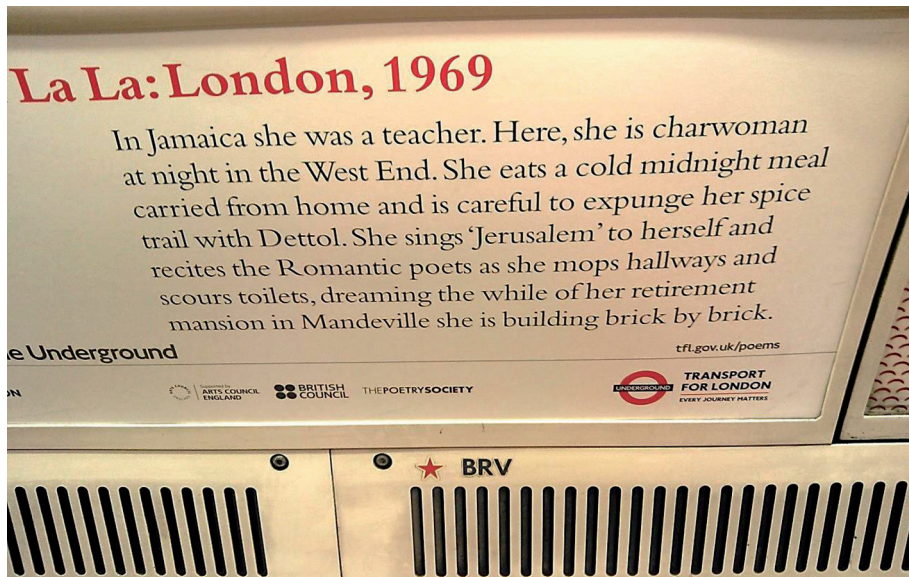


Fig. 1: The poem *Bam Chi Chi La La: London, 1969* by Lorna Goodison in London Underground (2013) Photo: Tzina Kalogirou

<sup>3</sup> When I read the poem with my students at the University they were keen to offer different interpretations. Some of them suggested that *Bam Chi Chi La La* is a metonymy for the woman herself or that it might be indicative of woman's nostalgia for the motherland and the memories of her childhood she still cherishes. Some others said that the *Bam Chi Chi La La* rhyme in the title indicates the consolation the woman finds remembering her childhood experiences with poetry or that she has suppressed the memories of that childhood. They also made very positive comments on the *significance* of the appearance of the poem in London Underground, and all commended highly on this. Some of them said that the interpretation of the poem might be dramatically different and far more interesting when you encounter the poem in situ than in the page.

## ICE CREAM, BISCUIT, POEM: THE PLAYFUL SPIRIT OF POETRY

Poetry can conspicuously be observed in children when they engage in the lore and language of the playground (Opie & Opie, 1959/2001; 1992; Cumming, 2007) to produce chants, rhymes, rhythms, songs, and poems. All these verbal products are very often characterized by an irreverent, daring tone, spirited nonsense, and a will to transgress the adult rules, the social constraints, or the rules of decorum in language. They are “fun as well as funny; they are canny and rude, silly but quick-witted, playfully springing acoustic surprises that cannot help but bring a chuckle” (Warner, 2001: ix). Who has not made fun by reciting the following famous ditty (Opie & Opie, 1992: 87) – which, for many adults, is instantly reminding of a particular scene from the film *Down by Law* (1986) by Jim Jarmusch where the actor Roberto Benigni (whose character is in prison in this particular scene of the movie) starts hilariously to recite it repeatedly with his charming Italian accent:

I scream,  
You scream,  
We all scream  
For ice-cream.

This little poem reveals some of the essential qualities of poetry, especially children's, and, most importantly, points to poetry's overall playful character. It conveys the unmediated sensory appeal of all poetry, thus creating by language the specific flavor of the ice-cream. It is also closely associated with the pleasure of saying poems aloud making repetitive sounds with our mouth and using the specialized organs of the throat and the tongue or even accompanying this activity with our whole body. The poem is so delightful that you simply cannot stop reciting it, saying it aloud and enjoying the striking sensual impression it conveys through the pleasurable verbalplay with homophone words and sounds, almost equal to the sheer delight of the actual tasting of an ice-cream. It conveys a sense of freedom and liberation materialized both in linguistic and conceptual terms. It is also dependent on the rhythms used in oral memory recall and therefore, it is easily memorable. Its brevity (you can recite it in an instant) might reflect the quick melting of ice cream and by connotation the *vita brevis* idea; ice cream melts quickly, as does life, and the opportunities it presents. One must seize the moment and be merry before happiness passes. Maybe happiness is, after all, something little and ephemeral like a pistachio-flavored ice cream and somehow we have to realize that, painful as it may be. A skeptical adult cannot help doing thoughts like these when reading the poem. A young child, on the other hand, is more likely to perceive it in a less poignant and more straightforward way hence more genuinely, in accordance with its sensory qualities. I would gladly favored this kind of reading of the poem. The best thing we can do after all is

to consume it as quick as possible. Nevertheless, this seemingly silly old ditty is equally attractive and functional, whatever the reasons for its appeal may be, to all audiences. At the same time, it is resilient enough for the reader to perceive it in multiple ways.

Poetry has a spirit of its own which readers attend and embrace. Children's poetry more importantly, is often characterized as playful, ludic, humorous or whimsical, and in general, it is often associated with the qualities and the spirit of play, either the latter is conceived as an activity of the mind and the body, or as verbalplay with words. What is more, too often in children's poetry, play is the central theme of the poem with the protagonist immersed in any kind of ludicrous activity. According to Johan Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938/1949), a major study of the significance of play for human civilization, poetry, as other major aspects of human culture, can be seen as both a continuation of child's play and an outgrowth of the game- like rituals developed in earlier societies. The parallelism between poetry and play can be extended to their common capacity to "break down the absolute determinism of cosmos" (Huizinga, 1938/1949: 3). As in play, according to Huizinga, things are different from what we generally accept as 'ordinary life', so in poetry, things are segregated from the requirements of necessity. They have a different physiognomy from the one they wear in ordinary life and "they are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality" (Huizinga, 1938/1949: 119).

Children's poetry is very often preoccupied with the celebration of what is excluded or repressed from rational discourse. Seeking to convey a strong sense of liberation from the constraints of logic, poets very often rely on the long-established tradition of nonsense in order to explore the boundaries of language and to make a departure from rational discourse. The following poem "Jamie Dodgers aren't the only fruit" by A.F. Harrold (2015: 13) employs the often employed in children's poetry form of a list (Pullinger, 2017: 87–105) in order to offer a whimsical tribute to the delicious round jam-filled biscuit<sup>4</sup>. Harrold's list is redundant and it can be continued ad infinitum.

Biscuits come in many shapes.  
 Some are shaped like the sun.  
 Some are shaped like a Frisbee.  
 Some are shaped like a plate.  
 Some are shaped like a coin.  
 Some are shaped like a discus.  
 Some are shaped like a flying saucer.  
 Some are shaped like a non-flying saucer.  
 Some are shaped like a full moon.

<sup>4</sup> Lists can be found in poetry for adults as well. The poem "Wasp" by Rebecca Perry (2015: 13) is a poetic list dedicated to the wasp, an insect which, unlike the popular and acoustically pleasing bee (see for example, "Bees", Hughes, 2005: 157–158) is a somewhat neglected species in the menagerie of poetry.

Some are shaped like the face of a sundial.  
 Some are shaped like the face of a person with a face  
 shaped like a Jamie Dodger.  
 And that's just the round ones.

The poet makes an excessive *reductio ad absurdum* list of similes, celebrating through language the inventiveness and the infinite capacity of poetry to defamiliarize and re-invent the everyday reality through figurative language. Nonsense has a significant impact on children's poetry. Many of children's poetry characters, for instance, are peculiar, surreal or nonsensical creatures à la manière de Edward Lear (e.g., "The architect of cheese" by Carol Ann Duffy, 2009: 253–54), while some of them are created instantly in language as portmanteau words (see for instance, "Great Cow Artists" by Carol Ann Duffy, 2008: 58)<sup>5</sup>.

It might be argued that children's poetry does not put emphasis on the themes of alienation, anxiety, depression, vanity of life, etc., that we find more often in poetry for adults, especially in modern poetry. The elements that reader commonly encounters in children's poetry (Müller-Zettelmann, 2003: 188, enumerates some of them in the poetry of Duffy) are usually pleasing, tending to produce happy and reassuring feelings to the readers and to amuse them. Play has a dominant position in this pleasurable world. As a specific form and as a general playful attitude or mentality is ubiquitous throughout the cosmos of children's poetry.

#### MIGHTY WARRIORS: PLAY AS A POETIC THEME

Children's poetry contains full descriptions of play as physical activity in nature, as a game at home or as an action of make-believe manifested e.g. when children pretend to be pirates or astronauts. The concept of make-believe is strongly associated with any kind of imaginative activity and most conspicuously of course with the imaginative play during which the child dwells alternative worlds, or "paracosms" (Singer & Singer, 1992: 111–116)(see for instance "Today is very boring" by Jack Prelutski, Academy of American Poets, 2006: 16; "The perils of breakfast" by A.F. Harrold, 2015: 38) or create imaginary playmates (see for instance "My best mate" by A.F. Harrold, 201: 48). Numerous poems for children can be found that depict various playful activities with children (or surrogates) getting immersed in them. The most prominent classic example of the importance of play in children's poetry is R.L. Stevenson's pioneering collection *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) (Holland, 2010: 63–71) in which "play is not so much a theme... as an overriding, all-consuming preoccupation. The child in the collection has an insatiable, inexhaustible appetite for play" (Holland,

<sup>5</sup> Carol Ann Duffy often explores themes and topics related to great artists and writers. (*Pablo Picasso's Noël, Dorothy Wordsworth's Christmas Birthday*).

2010: 63). In almost all the poems of the collection, children are climbing trees, making paper boats, day-dreaming, playing with blocks or other toys, swinging, and all and all are engaged in different playful activities.

In contemporary children's poetry, play can take many forms, and it can be manifested in many ways. I wish to exemplify the importance of play in children's poetry by having a closer look at one contemporary poem which is typical to the apparently humorous look of children's poetry at the world.

In the following poem "Skig the Warrior" by Kate Wakeling (2016: 13) a specific form of play (a game of Scrabble) is not only a core element in thematics but also permeates the entire poem as we try to explain below. The accompanying illustration depicts a not so brutal warrior bearing the typical horned helmet (fits to the popular image of a Viking) playing Scrabble with an elk.

Skig the warrior was more of a worrier.  
He didn't want to spear deer  
or pillage villages  
or hoot and toot when the crew looted somewhere new.  
He'd rather play Scrabble than join the rack and rabble.  
Yep, Skig was in no hurry to be a warrior.  
It only made him worry (and sorrier).

First of all, the poem fully embodies the sonorous, acoustic appeal of children's poetry and its general playful attitude towards language. Several verbalplay poetic devices (rhymes, alliteration, assonance, phonemic repetition, heavily end-stopped lines with one-syllable words like **deer**, **new**, **rabble**) are employed repeatedly and excessively to convey an intriguing sense of sound and to lead towards a humorous and amusing result. The device however that is used most conspicuously is the phonemic *minimal pair* that employs words which differ to each other in only one phoneme, like warrior-worrier, pillage-village, hoot-toot (words that indicate sound while sounding themselves). However, the worrier warrior collocation as a linguistic device seems to go beyond the witty verbal and sound play and to penetrate the conceptual level, creating a meaningful composite poetic structure.

According to my view, the poem is the closest we can find in children's poetry to what has been called in poetry criticism a "well-wrought" (Brooks, 1949/1968) poem or a "verbal icon" (Wimsatt, 1954), as the New Critics Cleanth Brooks and William Wimsatt respectively, so eloquently described the essential quality of poem to be an organic unity of form and content. In other words, the 'how' of poetry, the form, cannot be converted too easily into 'what' – the theme or the message. Poetry does not offer a set of itemized ideas, and it cannot be analyzed into a profound and simple meaning. The poem is full of meaning that only its form can convey. No other medium could convey *that* meaning in the same way, and any changes in the formal aspects of the poem do inevitably modify and the content. The poem in question showcases precisely that; the meaning

is wrapped up and indistinguishable from the way it is articulated in language. "Skig the warrior" is written in a poetic language that is self-focused and draws attention to itself as language; however, the poem relies upon this intriguing self-referential language to open up the thought to new and refreshing conceptual possibilities. It creates an intense sensual impression but simultaneously conveys something deep and powerful in the level of meaning. We cannot simply read the poem, enjoy its linguistic wit, and put it aside; we need to ponder over it, to explore the potential nuances and conceptual possibilities that are latent in this notional and figurative character of Skig the warrior, and we want to play along with them. We know that Skig, a hilarious character indeed (who is obviously going through a comical identity crisis), exists only in language and imagination; nevertheless, we want to follow the mental path that he is opening up to us. The role of play is essential in the articulation of his personality. He is a mighty warrior and yet he prefers to play Scrabble (a game that develops brain skills) with his pet (the illustration conjures up the familiar world of children's poetry with all its animated animals and domestic scenes) because he does really detest the cruelty of his war-obsessed world. As a character in a children's poem Skig is simultaneously a cultural icon from history and a child surrogate, a figure that suspends with his own very existence the boundaries between different semiotic codes: the referential and the symbolic, the historic and the mythic, the realistic and the fictive. His embodied willingness for play instead of pillaging villages is a daring imaginative gesture that leads to a radical new envisioning of our common knowledge, which in this case might be – to put it annoyingly briefly: 'Vikings were bloodthirsty warriors'. Play, encapsulated in the poetic discourse, transgresses the limits of rationality (as Skig wishes to transgress the limits of his identity) and thus creates new possibilities for the imagination, recreating our reality or uplifting it in a new secondary world. It might also be said that the poem has undoubtedly the potential to communicate strong messages against stereotypes, war and violence, always within its playful form and without being overtly and annoyingly moralistic. At the same time manifests play as an essential human need and a fundamental aspect of children's everyday life. The poem encourages the readers to ask (in a graduated and infinite manner): Couldn't they just let me be? Couldn't I just play and have fun sometimes instead of doing what duty calls? Couldn't we all live according to our wishes and be kind, instead of fighting against each other? *What if* (the basic presumption of any make-believe activity) there was no violence in human history?

#### WHAT'S IN A GARDEN?

As has been emphasized by many scholars representing different disciplines and fields in academic scholarship, the garden is a meeting point of several discourses, having being analyzed according to different conceptual schema-

ta. A garden is “a text, replete with cultural and historical information” (Elkins, 2008: 72). In the remaining part of this article, I wish to examine the poetic representation, the symbolic significance and the textual interplay of play and the garden (or play *in* a garden) within a body of contemporary children’s poetry. The poetry of Grace Nichols is the focal point of my argument.

It is generally accepted by commentators on her work that the contemporary Caribbean-British poet Grace Nichols is concerned with challenging matters regarding race, gender, and cultural diversity, and more specifically with the nature and the social construction of black female identities (Escudero, 2000). Tracing back to her own history and the wider history of her motherland, she often highlights in her poetry the experience of “transculturation” (Paul, 2000: 86) and moving between cultures, Caribbean and English, from a postcolonial perspective. From the beginning of her poetic career, she has been dedicated to offering resisting possibilities to all those who have been somehow silenced or whose subjectivity and social existence has been negatively constructed. Most importantly, the silenced, oppressed subject who Nichols seeks to revoice and in a way empower is the *woman*, who, in Nichols’ poetry most exclusively, happens also to be *fat* and *black* (*The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*), a daring sum of stereotypes to be contested and unmasked.

Sharing some of the basic preoccupations of Caribbean poetry (Bryan and Styles, 2013), Nichols made the anthropogeography and the history of her motherland (a history of slavery and colonialism) a central issue in her poetry. She uses frequently linguistic elements and registers borrowed freely from Standard English, Creole, and Black British English to articulate a distinctive poetic idiom. Her poetic craftsmanship almost always results in a natural, spontaneous expression deeply rooted in orality. Another characteristic of her work is the juxtaposition of diverse cultural elements, British and Caribbean. Especially in her children’s poems, the reframing and appropriation of English nursery rhymes formulated by a Caribbean perspective is another tendency. Her poems for children evoke vividly the nature and the rich cultural heritage of the Caribbean islands, the people of her motherland, the traditions that they cherish, and the stories that they tell. She also raises matters of environmental sensitivity (see for instance “For forest”, Nichols, 1988: 38–39) fostering attitudes of respect towards nature.

The poem “Come on into my tropical garden” (Nichols, 1988: 1) is set in a tropical garden which offers endless possibilities for playful encounters with an exuberant, lively nature. Nichols applies the garden metaphor – alluding possibly to Stevenson – to the tropical landscape. The poet invites the implied and the real reader – the child – into her own poetic universe, a natural landscape richly invested with pleasing things, joyful elements, and pastime activities. The landscape is also replete with a startling variety of tropical flora and fauna. We might argue that it is actually portrayed as a cornucopia of natu-

ral wonders and sensual delights for the child to play with. It is a place to eat, drink, and have fun.

On the other hand, Nichols' garden, compared to the more standardized Stevenson's gardens (*A Child's Garden of Verses*), seems quite the opposite. Stevenson's are "formal pleasure gardens attended by others" (Paul, 2000: 87), places where the child can play "safe; secured; untroubled" (Holland, 2010: 67). They are protected by walls ("Keepsake Mill," Stevenson, 1855/2007: 36–37) which sequestered them from the tensions of real life. They are also clearly British, full of endemic fairy-inhabited flowers that can easily be found in English gardens as well as in English literature and folk tradition ("Flowers," Stevenson 1855/2007: 86). Moreover, Stevenson's gardens are written and created in a milieu of British colonialism and more or less reflect imperialist pre-occupations.

Now the poem by Nichols:

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

O you can roll up in the grass  
 and if you pick up a flea  
 I'll take you down for a quick dip-wash  
**in the sea**  
 believe me there's nothing better  
 for getting rid of a flea  
 than having a quick dip-wash in the sea

Come on into my tropical garden  
 Come on in please come on in

The kinetic energy of the child is in a way reflected on the form of the poem whose frequent word-phrase repetitions, alliterations, assonances, and rhymes tend to a dynamic, acoustically pleasing result. Since the rhyme scheme is slightly loose the poet uses the figure of *epiphora* (Preminger and Brogan, 1993: 73) in the second line of the first stanza (Come on **in** // and have a laugh **in**) and the figure of *epanadiplosis* (Nakas & Kalogirou, 2014) in the fourth line of the first stanza and in the last line (**Come on in** please **come on in**) to enhance the rhythm of the poem. Since epiphora and epanadiplosis are forms of syntactic parallelism they work to enhance the sense of symmetry and balance in the poem creating symmetrical clauses, separated by a caesura in the case of the epiphora used in the second line. The symmetrical clauses **come on in** in the fourth line of the



first stanza and in the last line are separated by a heavily stressed word, ‘**please**’. Heavily stressed masculine rhymes are used in frequent (**in-drink-in, flea-sea**, etc.). Another significant feature of the poem’s form is the *enjambment* (I’ll take you down for a quick dip-**wash/** in the sea) in the third and fourth lines of the third stanza. The acoustically intriguing **wash** at the end of the line awakes what T.S. Eliot has famously called “auditory imagination” (Eliot, 1933: 118–119):

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.

This ‘wash’ at the end of the line evokes the sound of the sea and the splashing of the waves onto the shore (more or less as the very word “wash” ‘splashes’ on the end of the line). It should be noticed that the enjambment of the word “wash” is used wisely only once because Nichols is a skillful poet and knows not to overuse a good device. Anyway, the sensual imagery is a conspicuous feature of the poem. It deals with all the five senses conjuring up to the reader’s mind visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile mental images. Imagery and acoustics work together to create a vivacious poem.

It has been said before that Nichols might re-appropriate the orderly Stevensonian garden. However, it might also be argued that what is actually represented in the poem is not a garden but a tropical landscape. If it is true that “A Garden... is naturally apt to fill the Mind with Calmness and Tranquility, and to lay all its turbulent Passions to rest” (Addison quoted by Elkins, 2008: 69) then Nichols’ restless garden does not fit in. What is more, a garden is a tamed, irrigated and secluded part of land that has been designed by humans for pleasure and retreat from the noise of life, while the poem’s garden is uncultivated, boisterous and borderless and the animals in it belong to the wildlife. However, it is equally obvious that the poetic voice treats the tropical landscape as *her* garden, claiming ownership to all the physical elements. What is more, she actually transforms the landscape into a garden with points for relaxation (hammock); she domesticates the animals and processes the natural resources to make drinks and sweets: from the sugar cane makes the cake, from the pineapples the drink, and so on. It is obviously a self-sustained landscape that feeds most importantly, the appetite of the child to play ceaselessly. It might be added thus that the garden is also on the child’s direct disposal and in close, physical encounter with her (the hibiscus can be picked; the chimpanzees are kissed, etc.). In general, there is a symbiotic relationship between the child and nature.

Nevertheless, the action of the child is crucial for the enlivenment of the garden. As Tom Lubbock argued, elaborating on Henri Bergson’s philosophical treatise *Le Rire*, a landscape is inherently not funny. It can be beautiful or ugly or sublime, but it will never be laughable unless it receives a human *input* (Lubbock, 2011: 45). In this poem, the human input to the landscape is precisely the spir-

ited poetic voice (we assume that it belongs to a child or the poet who invokes the child within), the poetic speaker. She is who animates and invigorates the landscape. With speech-act utterances and the repeated heartfelt invitation, the voice is calling the animals, is setting up all natural things in motion, and then, invites the child-reader to get center-stage, interact playfully with nature and have a laugh.

Another aspect of the poem that should be noticed is that the child is as wild and irrepressible as the chimpanzees. The third stanza is permeated by indeterminacy between the animal and the child. Picking up a flea and then getting rid of it with a quick dip-wash in the sea does not really fit the schema of human doing; they are, if not unique to the animal kingdom, nevertheless more common among animals. It is not likely a child to pick fleas; lice are much more common among schoolchildren, for example. However, the third stanza foregrounds more clearly the animalistic quality of the child's play; it is corporal in an animalistic way (rolling up in the grass) and is intensely visceral, producing a feeling of joy. It should be noticed that in all the poems of the collection, Nichols works in the contact zone between animal and child. The child lives in close proximity with the wild fauna of the Caribbean. The second poem of the collection entitled "Alligator" (Nichols, 1988: 4) is typical of Nichols' tendency to bring together the animal and the child in an overall atmosphere of petty danger consciously and safely reenacted through play. Nichols' envisioned child is unfettered and extremely kinetic during her playful encounters with the Caribbean nature. She seems to share some essential qualities with the tropical nature which is beautiful yet unpredictable and meteorologically fierce. Giving emphasis to the wild aspect of child's play in equally wild nature, Nichols achieved to avoid the stereotyped romantic image of the child in an idealized pastoral landscape. She also seems to make a departure from Stevenson's children who, as we have seen, use to play in a tidy manner in the inside of well-arranged English gardens.

Nichols created a highly symbolic and semantically rich tropical garden, setting up and suspending a set of seeming polarities: garden versus nature, domesticated versus wild animal, child versus animal, and symbolic versus physical play. The child manifests her appetite for play both as bodily, physical action and as a gesture of imagination because, as we have seen, in the realm of the child's imagination the landscape can be *her own* garden, her kingdom, where she can invite her friends and play with her pets. In this way, the poem exemplifies a trope or idea that is pivotal in children's poetry: the power of looking with child-like delight at the objects of nature and the power of the imagination to create alternative realities.

The title of the poem "Come on into my tropical garden" which also serves as the title of the entire collection might be considered as an extended metaphor for poetry itself. Nichols' invitation to her tropical garden stands as an invitation to her poetry, to a poetic symbolic garden that is meaningful and artfully crafted to appeal young reader's senses, needs, and imagination. It is a

secure space for the reader to inhabit and it is a powerful, instructive metaphor for reimagining the whole act of reading the poem. To use Donald Winnicott's terminology in his seminal study on play (1971/2005), this poetically articulated 'garden' could be described as a "transitional space"<sup>6</sup>, a middle space between reader's inner world and the projected world on the page, crammed by objects that are transitional by nature – like the hibiscuses in the poem, that are touched and picked like toys, and the chimpanzees that are kissed like pets or soft toys. Due to its location between text and the reader, its evocation of intense sensory experience, and its openness to the imagination and all kinds of playing activities, Nichols' garden might stand as an ideal transitional space. This tropical garden is much more an imaginative make-believe construction and a nest for the reader's imagination than a 'real' landscape. It is loud with laughs and vivid with imaginative storylines that connect nature with the child who dwells in it. Most importantly, it is a garden that can be touched, seen, heard, smelled, tasted, shared, and lived in.

#### CONCLUSION

Poetry is life. It is literally found anywhere, and it can be experienced "five-to-nine in the morning, four-twenty in the day, indoors, outdoors, sun and rain, with a king on the throne, with a fool or a child, or no one" (Maxwell, 2016: 15). It is a genre with considerable wideness and cross-over appeal.

Children's poetry is placed between the verbal and the visual; it can be performed orally and being read on a printed or a digital page. It has been studied as a multimodal art that relies upon orality and literacy, sound and page, and requiring reader's commitment to all its aural, visual and tangible qualities since it is an art that consistently and repetitively cultivate reader's sensibility to the sound, the meanings and the connotations of words, the cadences and the repetitive rhythms of phrases. A children's poem could also be seen as a conceptually deep and complicated "verbal icon", that is a unique combination of meaning and form. The exuberance of its rhetoric and sound, its rhythmical feeling and the rich texture of its verses usually are conveyed through a well-embodied structure and form. Poems are extremely variable in tone, technique, meaning, and figurative language. They are glossed over multiple and various voices and conceptual possibilities long enough for the reader to wonder, question, and actively participate in the process of meaning-making.

<sup>6</sup> Winnicott developed this concept as explanation of the means by which infants initially establish their own sense of separateness from the world around them and also their relationship with that world. When the infant can perceive an external object-the blanket, the teddy-bear- as it is her own creation or part of herself, that illusion allows her to experience temporarily this intermediary space between herself and the world and then the object can be considered "transitional".

Poetry is heavily invested with playfulness. The few poems that were more closely discussed in this paper might showcase that the significant form of play can be manifested in many ways in children's poetry and also be traced in poetic language as playful humor or exemplified in intense verbalplay. Play is permeating the entire poetic world with an embodied willingness to break up with the strict rules of logic with and within the language and the imagination. Play creates alternative realities and transitional spaces for the child to experiment and inhabit and thus offers her the chance to challenge and reappropriate the world of experience.

The garden offers a powerful metaphor for children's poetry. In the British-Caribbean poet Grace Nichols' poetry, the garden is replete with nuances and symbolic associations. It is distinctively tropical; it bears endemic geographical features closely related to the particular tropical landscape and it is closely entwined with the flora and fauna of the Caribbean islands. It is also radical as a poetic reimagining of the canonical prototype garden in Stevenson's children's poetry. Grace Nichols places the child (or the child mediated by the voice of the speaker) at the very center of a symbolic garden-natural landscape to play and celebrate nature's delights. However, it is not merely nature's influence on the child but equally the child's perception of the garden and her action within it as well as the role of imagination in producing this celebratory and fanciful experience. Nature does retain the privileged position as the source of revitalization and beauty but at the same time is untamed and full of wild energy that resonates with the child's kinetic energy, unfettered imagination and an insatiable appetite for play.

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