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By Kathya De Silva Senarath Once upon a time there was someone or something called ‘Humpty Dumpty’. This ‘Humpty Dumpty’, due to some reason sat on a wall. Maybe he wanted to get a better look at what was taking place on the road, or maybe he was just tired and thought he’d take a rest. Whatever the reason, he took a very bad decision as he couldn’t keep his balance and fell on the ground smashing into bits and pieces. Although the King’s horses and men were nearby, their efforts to put ‘Humpty Dumpty’ back together were in vain. This story sounds utterly nonsensical and too tragic to be a children’s nursery rhyme. But how many would have stopped to reason or try to find out as to who or what this ‘Humpty Dumpty’ was and how this story came to be one of the most popular nursery rhymes all over the world? A little research on nursery rhymes out of curiosity led me to some insights into the history and the way of life of the British society many centuries ago and how they tried to grapple with the realities and social problems persistent at that time. Their answer to social injustice and suppression had been to come up with clever rhymes sung as resistance against their plight and passed around to criticise public figures and events. Fairies’ The popular fable that surrounds the ‘Humpty Dumpty’ rhyme is that a group of fairies found an egg and they had given it a human appearance with hands and feet. While they were thus engaged, the King with his horses had passed by and the fairies had wanted to see the parade over the wall. The egg too requested the fairies’ better judgment. Tragically, however, he lost his balance and fell off the wall. And the rhyme goes: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall Humpty Dumpty had a great fall All the King’s horses and all the King’s men Couldn’t put Humpty together again. Some believe that ‘Humpty Dumpty’ has references to war and violence, quite inappropriate for a children’s nursery rhyme if we take a look at the background stories. Nowhere in the rhyme does it say that ‘Humpty Dumpty’ was an egg. But over time, the pictures that come with the rhyme show that it was an egg which easily broke into pieces. The rhyme is said to have appeared first in ‘Juvenile Amusements’ by Samuel Arnold in 1797. Records show that it was also printed in 1810 and became famous through Lewis Carroll’s book, ‘Alice Through the Looking Glass’, where Humpty Dumpty is shown as a round egg. Lyrics However, the rhyme goes back much earlier to the 15th century England with many versions to the lyrics. During that time, ‘Humpty Dumpty’ had also been a nickname to describe large people. Some believe that ‘Humpty Dumpty’ referred to Charles I himself - the Humpty Dumpty of England. Others say the rhyme refers to King Richard III and his defeat at the Battle of Bosworth. The theory that ‘Humpty Dumpty’ was a powerful cannon, used during the English Civil War (1642-1649), is one of the common assumptions surrounding the rhyme. This kind of cannon, once fell on the ground, was too heavy to be lifted and pieced together again for use, which is thought to be the origin of the rhyme. Whatever it is, Humpty Dumpty’s tragedy makes up quite a story. At one glance, it may seem that the rhyme ‘Mary Mary quite contrary,’ is about a girl who loves gardening and how her luscious garden grows. The rhyme goes, Mary Mary, quite contrary, How does your garden grow? With silver bells, and cockle shells, And pretty maids all in a row. However, a popular theory is that it refers to darker and more dangerous workings of a murderous mind. The rhyme is thought to be a reference to Queen Mary I of England (1553-1558) or Mary Tudor, the daughter of King Henry the XIII, also known as ‘Bloody Mary’. Queen Mary was known for her mission to return England to Catholicism and systematically eliminated hundreds of Protestants, thus earning her the name ‘Bloody Mary’. Graveyard As such, the ‘garden’ in the rhyme is thought to be the graveyard, growing in size with the executed Protestants for their defiance to give up their faith. Silver Bells and cockleshells are thought to refer to torture devices. The ‘pretty maids’ would then refer to the guillotine type machine called ‘the maiden’ where beheading and being burnt at the stake took place. As such, ‘Mary Mary quite contrary’ cannot be taken at face value to be an innocent reference to a garden. ‘Ring a ring of roses’ is another rhyme that is given numerous interpretations. At first glance, it looks like a children’s game, going round in circles and falling down at the end. But some analysts say that this rhyme has strong reference to the Bubonic Plague or Black Death which was prevalent in the late Middle Ages (1340-1400) when Europe including England experienced the most deadly disease outbreak in history, killing a third of the human population. By 1665, when the last outbreak in England was recorded, the plague had claimed nearly 15 percent of the population according to records. Although there is no proof of exactly how the rhyme came about, it is interesting to look at this common theory surrounding it. Changes The rhyme has gone through several changes to its lyrics and the most common version is, Ring-a-ring o’ roses, A pocket full of posies, A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all fall down According to some analysts, the ‘ring of roses’ refers to the rosy coloured rash that appears on the skin of the afflicted of the Bubonic plague. Sweet smelling flowers and herbs were carried in their pockets which people hoped would ward off the disease, thus the reference in the second line. Catching the infection is referred to by ‘atishoo’ with all falling down dead in the end. Of course, this skin crawling interpretation is challenged by others who say that the rhyme has no reference to the plague at all as it first appears many centuries after its last outbreak in England. Another assumption is that the rhyme may have had its origins in the religious ban on dancing among Protestants in the 19th century in Britain. Analysts say that this rhyme is a way by which youth found a way around the dancing ban. As there is no concrete evidence to back any of the claims to the rhyme’s true origin, some say that the explanations are products of our own century and have no hidden meaning at all. Of course the theories continue to emerge and children of this century still enjoy the lyrics and the dancing of this popular rhyme that was coined many centuries ago for reasons still unknown. Innocent story Let’s take a look at another classic, the innocent story about the black sheep named ‘Baa Baa’. Baa, baa, black sheep, Have you any wool? Yes, Sir, yes, Sir, three bags full; One for the master, and one for the dame, And one for the little boy who lives down the lane Some recite the last lines as ‘one for the little boy who cries down the lane,’ as well as ‘none for the little boy who cries down the lane.’ Some scholars say that the origin of this popular rhyme refers to the taxation introduced in 1275 in England where the price of one-third of the wool had to be forfeited in taxes to the nobility by the producer. The rhyme seems to be an outcry against the oppression of the common people by their rulers who became wealthier with the people’s hard labour. Going back to the rhyme, the two bags of wool are for the ‘Master’, probably a reference to the King and ‘his dame’ being the Queen, leaving with only one bag for the farmer. Some say the boy referred to in the last line is the farmer himself who ‘cries down the lane’ in despair as his wool was taken by the King. Thus, ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’ has been a creative way for the people to express dissent over the unfair practice of the nobility who took away their wool. Scandalous The most scandalous interpretation of them all is probably given to ‘Hey diddle diddle’ which paints a surreal picture of a cat playing the fiddle, a cow jumping over the moon and a dish running away with a spoon. The rhyme goes as, Hey diddle diddle, The cat and the fiddle, The cow jumped over the moon. The little dog laughed, To see such sport, And the dish ran away with the spoon There are numerous theories surrounding the origin of this rhyme where the first publication date appears to go back to 1765. Some theorists suggest that this nonsensical set of lines refer to a dark love triangle between an English nobleman called Robert Earl of Essex, Lettice Knollys, the cousin of the Queen and Queen Elizabeth I of England. Scholars say that Queen Elizabeth was secretly in love with Robert who was already married to Amy Robsart. When Robert’s wife was found dead at the bottom of a staircase, suspicions grew that the Queen had a hand in Amy’s death, which led to the Queen and Robert growing apart. Eventually, Robert fell in love with Lettice and they wed in secret knowing about the Queen’s temper. Thus, analysts say that the dish and spoon were Robert and Lettice who ‘ran away’, the cow was the Queen who suffered from unrequited love which was the moon and the dog being the Queen’s minister who played an advisory role. Assumption This is just one assumption but probably the most interesting one. None of these assumptions are proven to be accurate as like most children’s rhymes, the verse originated in oral tradition and scholars assume that it could simply be nonsensical lines created to entertain the children. Whatever it is, it cannot be assumed that such bizarre stories of cats, dogs and cows who engaged in highly uncanny behaviour originated out of nowhere and could certainly be with reference to what people saw and heard around them. Then there was that couple who went up the hill to fetch a pail of water and met with an accident. 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 Yet, another rhyme with violence and blood imagery, this rhyme whose origins are found in France according to some scholars, is thought to be a reference to King Louis XVI and his Queen Marie Antoinette. King Louis XVI and his Queen were beheaded by the French revolutionists during the Reign of Terror in 1793, a period of violence that occurred after the French Revolution. The violence was provoked by conflict between rival political factions and mass executions of the enemies of the revolution such as aristocrats and the nobility took place. The rhyme, ‘Jack and Jill,’ is thus thought to be a reference to the beheading of the King, ‘broke his crown,’ while his wife was the next victim. The rhyme has been modified and changed from language to language and culture to culture creating a variety of meanings and interpretations. The rhyme’s interpretation as the beheading is more or less the most common. Struggles The hardships and struggles of the people are found not only in the English language rhymes but also in rhymes and lullabys of other languages too. The Paru Kavi, Pal Kavi and Pathal Kavi, for example, have emerged to express the day to day struggles of the people. As in the English language nursery rhymes, these too are sung to our children to sooth and entertain them. It is with Humpty Dumpty, sheep, lambs and Jack and Jill that most of our childhood was spent. Going back to our childhood memories, we would invariably remember these characters that we fondly grew up with, unaware of the dark and serious nature of their origins. The rhymes have been so familiar and ingrained in us since childhood that we hardly notice their absurdity. However, it is under this guise of children’s entertainment that secret messages of satire and criticism of the oppression experienced by the people were communicated, as dissent is dealt with a heavy hand during the time. The freedom of expression, even though thus curtailed, has ironically ended the test of time and remains to date bringing much delight to our younger generations. HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, an ancient nonsense rhyme with fuzzy origins and engaging tune captures the imagination with whimsical characters doing interesting things! * Hey Diddle Diddle Song Sheet for SBWE in D Traditional Words and Tune Adapted by ELEG for SBWE To view or print this page, click here: SBWE SBS Hey Diddle w chords in D * Hey Diddle Diddle Song Sheet for SBWE Songbook Series (no chords) Traditional Words and Tune Page Coordinated by ELEG for SBWE Songbook Series To view or print this page, click here: SBWE SBS Hey Diddle no chords * Hey Diddle Diddle Traditional Words and Tune Illustrated by Yu-Hsuan Huang Published by Nosy Crow “Sing along with me!” Series * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE SING ALONG BOOK Traditional Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme Book Assembled for SBWE Illustrations by Various Artists This book is for classroom use only. * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE Traditional Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme Illustrated by Milo Winter From Childcraft, Volume 1, The Poems of Early Childhood (1954) * HI DIDDLE DIDDLE Traditional Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme Illustrated by Nola Langner From HI Diddle Diddle (A Book of Mother Goose Rhymes) * Hey Diddle Diddle Traditional Rhyme and Tune Illustrated by Moira Kemp Favorite Mother Goose Rhymes Series by ChildsWorld ***** HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE is found in almost every collection of Nursery Rhyme. The rhyme is featured or adapted in the following illustrations: * Hey, Diddle, Daddle Traditional Words and Tune Rhyme Adaptations by James Marshall Illustrated by James Marshall * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE is featured in: Hey Diddle, Diddle & Other Mother Goose Rhymes Traditional Words and Tunes Illustrated by Tomie dePaola * Printed music is available in: Wee Sing Nursery Rhymes and Lullabies Traditional Words and Tunes Compiled, Adapted and Arranged by Pamela Conn Beall and Susan Hagen Nipp Illustrated by Nancy Spence Klein ***** HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE for Sing Books with Emily Version 1 in Key of C As with so many things regarding Nursery Rhymes, there are different versions almost everywhere you look! This is Sing Books with Emily’s Hey Diddle Diddle Version 1. I will sing it also in D, but using a slightly different tune... * Hey Diddle Diddle for SBWE w chords in C Traditional Words and Tune Adapted by ELEG for SBWE To view or print this page, click here: Hey Diddle w chords in C for SBWE ***** * As always, Sesame Street comes up with a delightful version: ***** * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE wiki: * Googling for the origins of HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE gives a long list of possible stories in which the characters in the rhyme are supposed to represent people in various historical Elizabethan, Egyptian or Greek scandals. * A printable PDF with illustration and lyrics, here: * Some interesting resources and a downloadable PDF here: ***** Addendum, 8/6/2020 New Materials for HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE (and thoughts about accompaniment and making songs shorter) When accompanying the singing on ukulele, I can’t hold a book. So I’ve moved to making sing along posters for singing with ukulele accompaniment. That still leaves the books that need accompaniment, some really great looking ones. To have backing tracks (and until I can find someone to create backing tracks for me after the wonderful My Rehearsal Pianist stopped doing this work a few years ago), I’ve begun to seek out available karaoke and instrumental recordings for a lot of rhymes. There are great ones and horrible ones you can find on old CDs, Amazon, iTunes. When I find a good one, I use the free audio editing program Audacity (thanks to Jeff T. for telling me about it) to change keys and make them shorter. Regarding making tracks shorter, one of the best pieced of advice I ever got regarding singing or performing a song came from great Music Director Tex Arnold (who sadly died not long ago). Tex was an instructor when I attended the Cabaret Conference at Yale University in 2003. He said, “All songs are too long.” We can use our critical thinking skills that a song does need to go on for a suitable duration to tell a satisfying story. But especially in the case of Children’s Songs, this credo is spot on. Sing the rhyme once or twice (3 times) TOPS, depending on how enjoyable it is) and move on. I spend a lot of energy making sing along backing tracks SHORTER. In the case of HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, I found that my melody (which I arranged in the key of C), though similar, did not match any other instrumental melody line I could find. So I decided to adapt! I’ve arranged a new song sheet (in the key of D) to match the backing track I had made (in this case) long ago (and which matches the melodies of backing tracks readily available from iTunes). This way, I won’t have to keep track of numerous versions. My backing track and ukulele accompaniment song sheet will be the same. * Hey Diddle Diddle Song Sheet for SBWE in D Traditional Words and Tune Adapted by ELEG for SBWE To view or print this page, click here: SBWE SBS Hey Diddle w chords in D ***** HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE: Sing Books with Emily Sing Along Hootenanny Traditional Words and Tune HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, an Illustrated Song * This and all other sing along videos are gathered in the SING BOOKS WITH EMILY SING ALONG HOOTENANNY Playlist on Sing Books with Emily’s YouTube Channel. ♦♦ To find more info and materials for Sing Books with Emily, visit the link in this post or type the song title into the search box of the Sing Books with Emily blog:- Like or Follow Sing Books with Emily on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter Come Sing Books with Emily #SingBooksWithEmily #IllustratedSong #SingToKids #Enrichment #SingToChildren #ChildrensMusic #PictureBookSong #Music #Sing #ShareCulturalHeritage #EducationalEnrichment #CulturalEnrichment #MusicConnectsUs #ChildrensBook #EarlyLiteracy #FunWithMusic #kidlitart #KidsBook #PictureBook #MusicInTheClassroom #1000booksbeforekindergarten #MotherGoose #NurseryRhyme #heydiddlediddle ***** Addendum, 7/6/2015 It’s a simple fact that seemingly simple Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes have a lot to offer. I’m embracing these little songs this summer and creating books for individual rhymes, so as to sing them as individual songs. Here’s one for HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE SING ALONG BOOK Traditional Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme Book Assembled for SBWE Illustrations by Various Artists This book is for classroom use only. ***** Addendum, 4/19/2018 * Hey Diddle Diddle Traditional Words and Tune Illustrated by Yu-Hsuan Huang Published by Nosy Crow “Sing along with me!” Series This version of HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE was purchased with a kind 2017/2018 school year Teacher’s Grant from the Tuckahoe Elementary School PTA, put in for Sing Books with Emily by the Kindergarten Team. I’m so grateful! Nosy Crow’s rendition of HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE is really cute. For one thing, I appreciate when the characters are animals. This allows all kids to identify with all the characters without having to encounter the barriers and feelings associated with racial and cultural identities. This Nosy Crow board book also features engaging moving parts (like a wheel you can turn to make the cow jump over the moon which also makes the carousel spin. Nosy Crow’s webpage for this book has an embedded sing along player: HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, as a rhyme, has been in my repertoire for some time, but it is always good for children to see rhymes represented different ways. I’m making a conscious effort to include more rhymes in my visits with kids PreK and Kindergarten. Many studies have shown that children come to Kindergarten knowing a number of nursery rhymes by heart significantly increases the ease with which that child learns to read. And the effects continue even to more advanced elementary grades. Singing rhymes might seem like a silly, even expendable activity, but the effects it has on forming the brain of an emergent reader are profound. Knowing rhythms tunes the ears for sounds and language. And knowing a rhyme by heart helps a kid to start recognizing words in print that they already know in their heads. And then young brains can use that skill to start making other connections. This mission to include more rhymes in my repertoire is even more profound after talking to many PreK and K teachers who say that few children come to school knowing rhymes any more. This is a gap that I can help fill. I also sing frequently at libraries and community events. I will certainly work to share with parents and caregivers how fun and easy it is to sing these kinds of rhymes with their young ones. One of my goals is to performs programs for people who don’t feel confident singing rhymes with their children (maybe they don’t have books or they don’t know the words or the tunes) and teach them and give them the resources to do that. Along these lines, I’ve already begun my SING BOOKS WITH EMILY SONGBOOK SERIES. This is a series of printable song sheets linked to posts with everything I can find to help folks know about and sing the rhymes (including Sing Books with Emily embedded scratch vocal sing along SoundCloud players). ***** Related Posts * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, an Illustrated Song * A 2017/2018 School Year Tuckahoe Elementary School PTA Teacher’s Grant (and what I got with it) * SING BOOKS WITH EMILY SONGBOOK SERIES HOST PAGE * SBWE Songbook Series: Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes * MOTHER GOOSE AND NURSERY RHYMES - INDIVIDUALLY ILLUSTRATED Mother Goose and Nursery Rhymes with Individually Illustrated Singable Picture Books * MOTHER GOOSE AND NURSERY RHYME COMPILATIONS A list containing compilations of Mother Goose and Nursery Rhyme Singable Picture Books, including links and resources for learning, singing, and playing the tunes * USEFUL TUNES IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN * NURSERY RHYMES AND MOTHER GOOSE FOR SBWE * SING-ALONG RESOURCES AND PRINTABLE MATERIALS This is the place to find Print Materials Created by Emily * A Book for Hey Diddle Diddle * HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, a new song sheet for SBWE in Key of C * New Materials for HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE

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