

Girl and World Don't Rhyme

By the Light of the Silvery Moon

*By the light
Of the Silvery Moon
I want to spoon.
To my honey I'll croon love's tune.
Honey moon,
Keep a-shining in June.
Your silvery beams will bring love dreams.
We'll be cuddling soon
By the silvery moon.*

The year was 1909 and these words written by Gus Edwards and Eric Madden were influential in starting the trend in rhyming music. It was shortly after Ada Jones recorded this song on an "Edison cylinder" in 1910 that these lyrics became well known and established the early standard. It became a "stock rhyme" because a stock rhyme is a type of rhyme that people see all the time. (See, even I got caught up in the rhyming game in this description.) In the nine lines of the first chorus of the song, the word moon is rhymed eight times! If you were the product of a typical childhood, you grew up in a simple world where things rhymed. Since none of us were born with the gift of fluency in our native language, the learning process began slowly. There was also plenty of help from those around us. We imitated what we heard, and certain things were committed to memory more easily than others because they rhymed. This is one of the reasons mothers sing to their children. Music and phrases that rhyme have a way of staying with us. How many childhood songs or nursery rhymes can you recite today?

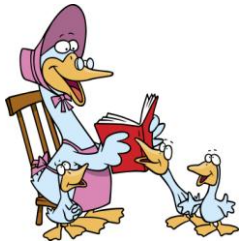


Since the dawn of spoken language, people have played with its adaptations. Archaeologists have found numerous rhymes scratched on walls dating back to the times of the Ancient Roman Empire, and in other cultures, people have created riddles, puns and other variations of plays on words. From the oldest nursery rhymes such as "Rain, rain go away, come again another day," to Shakespeare's rhyming verses, poetry and song have been a vital part of our culture. Many early nursery rhymes were never written down, they were passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation and some of them date back as early as 500 BC.

Nursery rhymes were perhaps the earliest forms of rhyming verse. Our memories have much in common when it comes to learning new things; the shorter the phrase the

better, the more repetition the better, and if that wording rhymes, retention of that content increases exponentially. Certain songs were written so that they will be as easy to remember as a childhood nursery rhyme. When you accompany words with music, retention of that content is also much higher. Advertisers and corporate marketing departments have been practicing this notion with tremendous results. Rhyming words and phrases are part of our lives, but how well do we know rhyme?

Unfortunately, rhyming words in music is not something most people do well, and this includes many of today's songwriters. History has proven that poets have mastered



this technique in writing as evidenced by centuries of excellent poetry that truly rhymes. Reciting poetry has always been a pleasurable experience (unless you were forced to stand up in front of class and recite one of your "original creations"), mostly because those repetitive patterns render musicality and rhythm to simple words. That is why good poetry has withstood the test of time.

From simple versus like "Roses are red, Violets are blue, Sugar is sweet, and so are you," to the sophisticated plays and sonnets of William Shakespeare, rhymes in literature have been with us for a long time. Despite what some people say, what we know as rhyming verses did not start with Mother Goose.

What is Rhyme?

A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words, most often in the final syllables. In the specific sense, two words rhyme if their final stressed vowel and all following sounds are identical. But this isn't always the case. Many times, songwriters rely on tropes to get their point across in their lyrics. A trope is a word, phrase, or expression that is used in a figurative way, usually for effect. Tropes are devices that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds. They are a form of anticipation. They occur because as students of our native language, we are conditioned to expect words or phrases or sounds that follow other words or phrases in sequence. A good example of this type of trope can be found in the nursery rhyme, *Humpty Dumpty*.

*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!***



Simple rhymes are those that are easy to track and that follow the rules. In songwriting, a writer can get away with much more than those of us who communicate via simple written words. In a song, there are times when the beat of the music and sometimes the sheer volume of the background sound masks imperfect rhyme. There are also times when a forced pause or a repetition contributes to the verse's degree of tolerability.

Music Tropes?

A music trope occurs when you hear a rhyme in a song and you're compelled to cringe at how painfully that rhyme is forced in (even though the content of that song dictates that such a word or phrase actually belongs). What you heard wasn't what you expected. Maybe the line was rearranged into grammatical nonsense to accommodate it, or the rhythm was broken or crammed into a phrase that really made no sense at all. Sometimes words had to be intentionally mispronounced to make it rhyme, or an unlikely metaphor invented. In any case, those guilty parties were really better off not trying to make it rhyme. This is at least partially the fault of the English language itself, because it is generally harder to find rhymes in English than other languages. Sometimes the difference between accents may make a rhyme painful in but acceptable in Britain or Australia, and vice versa. But that's no excuse. For the past century, America has produced more than its share of bad music rhymes.

"Weird Al" Yankovic

Writing a song parody is an art. While most people can sing a song and substitute one of that song's words with something funny, doing it on a consistent basis and for an entire song is extremely difficult. The talent related to this type of creativity needs to be two-fold; finding a substitute word or phrase that is funny, and fitting the new phrase into the original pattern of rhyme, rhythm, and with the same number of syllables as the original. "Shoehorning" or cramming a phrase with more or fewer syllables than the words you are replacing is strictly taboo. When it comes to humorous song parodies, there is nobody like "Weird Al."



Al has made a living poking fun at traditional songs and their lyrics. He not only keeps the original music beats and inflections of the song, he creates lyrics that fit line for line and beat for beat when compared to the original. Here's an example of his parody of Michael Jackson's *Bad*:

The original by Michael Jackson

*Because I'm Bad, I'm Bad-
Come On
(Bad Bad-Really, Really Bad)
You Know I'm Bad, I'm Bad-
You Know It
(Bad Bad-Really, Really Bad)
You Know I'm Bad, I'm Bad-
Come On, You Know
(Bad Bad-Really, Really Bad)
And The Whole World Has To
Answer Right Now
Just To Tell You Once Again,
Who's Bad . . .*

"Weird Al's" Version

*Because I'm fat, I'm fat,
Come On
(Fat, fat, really, really fat)
You know I'm fat, I'm fat,
You know it
(Fat, fat, really really fat)
You know I'm fat, I'm fat,
Come on, you know
(Fat, fat, really really fat)
Don'tcha call me pudgy,
Portly or stout
Just now tell me once again,
Who's fat . . .*

In order to appreciate Weird Al's version, you need to listen to the original by Michael Jackson and simply insert the parody's words into the song. Incredible! Weird Al gets it. He knows how to find words that rhyme and how to maintain the integrity of the song, particularly when it comes to the cadence of the original piece. He has done this for over ninety-five songs and counting. His parodies include versions of actual songs from Aerosmith, Eminem, the Eagles, Billy Joel, Madonna, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, U2, and even the Beatles.

The Name Game

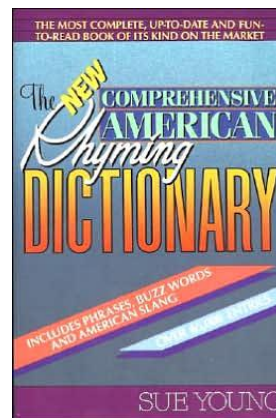
Back in 1965, Shirley Ellis recorded a song called *The Name Game*. It was a catchy tune that rose all the way to number three on the charts. Those of us who grew up during that era became pretty good at inserting our friend's names into this song and creating our own versions.

*The name game!
Shirley!
Shirley, Shirley bo Birley Bonana fanna fo Firley
Fee fy mo Mirley, Shirley!
Come on everybody!
I say now let's play a game
I betcha I can make a rhyme out of anybody's name
The first letter of the name, I treat it like it wasn't there
But a B or an F or an M will appear
And then I say bo add a B then I say the name and Bonana fanna and a
fo
And then I say the name again with an F very plain
and a fee fy and a mo
And then I say the name again with an M this time
and there isn't any name that I can't rhyme*

Note: You might not want to insert the name Chuck to this rhyming song when you are around small children.

Some people get it . . . others don't.

When it comes to rhyming a single word, most people can do it. Ask someone to rhyme a one syllable word like *day* and they would have no problem coming up with a number of words that work – pay, way, say, may, bay, stay, or pray. Simple. Now let's look up the word *world*. According to the *Comprehensive American Rhyming Dictionary*, the words that rhyme with *world* are: burled, curled, furled, knurled, twirled, and whirled. Let's open that same reference tool to see what rhymes with *girl*. The rhyming dictionary lists these matches for *girl*: burl, curl, earl, Earle, ensnarl, furl, gnarl,



hurl, Merle, pearl, snarl, swirl, twirl, unfurl, and whirl. So, the rhyming dictionary doesn't show that girl and world rhyme with each other. Maybe that's because they don't rhyme! Then why are these two words paired as the most commonly forced mismatch in the history of music?

Apparently, this obvious example of bad and forced rhyme hasn't bothered that many of us because the American public keeps supporting this poor songwriting practice by singing along, downloading, and purchasing recordings of songs that include girl and world "rhymes." So I started thinking (which is always a dangerous thing for me to do). Am I alone in my harshly critical approach to bad rhymes? Probably not, then why is it so prevalent? Rather than carry on my own personal crusade, perhaps I need to solicit other opinions. I should solicit advice and wisdom at the expert level . . . from one of the greats of literature, and who would be more qualified than William Shakespeare?

When in doubt, ask Shakespeare.

Come on girl
You're my worl . . . duh.
You must be bloody
kidding. Those words
obviously do not rhyme!

When it comes to acknowledging the great names in the realm of literature, perhaps there is no one with better credentials than the great William Shakespeare. Even though he lived over four centuries ago, his body of work and understanding of the English language is well known and time tested. He was a master of linguistics in virtually all of its forms including rhyme, whether it was in his sonnets or contained in the verses and the dialog of his plays. Shakespeare has also been credited for "inventing" a number of words and phrases that appeared for the first time in his works that later became part of everyday language.



Here are some words "invented" by William Shakespeare: **fashionable** (*Troilus and Cressida*), **sanctimonious** (*Measure for Measure*), **eyeball** (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and **lackluster** (*As You Like It*); along with the expressions **foregone conclusion** (*Othello*), **in a pickle** (*The Tempest*), **wild goose chase** (*Romeo and Juliet*), and **one fell swoop** (*Macbeth*).

When I called, I was genuinely surprised when he answered the phone.

An interview with William Shakespeare

Good morning, or is it afternoon over there, Mr. Shakespeare? Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to speak with me.

The pleasure is sincerely mine. Besides, as you probably have surmised, time is no longer an issue for me, and I just love the way you Americans pronounce “schedule.” Just call me Will. So, what can I do for you?

Fine . . . Will. As I mentioned in my letter, I would like to solicit your opinion on what seems to be a disturbing trend in creative writing. This trend involves rhyme, or should I say, forced rhyme in music. It appears that this development started sometime in the early 1900s and continues to the present day. While this issue is present in some poetry, it seems to be more prevalent in song lyrics. Are you aware of this trend, and if so, what are your thoughts?

Of course I am aware of it! That is one of the reasons I consented to do this interview? I was resting peacefully for centuries when I became an unwilling victim of that worn out cliché and began rolling over in my grave. I can also tell you that I am not the only author to suffer that fate upon hearing our beautiful language abused in such a way.

Abused? But how would you know this?

One shouldn't assume that the dearly departed are without the usual forms of sensual perception. While music now is not what it was in the Elizabethan era, it is still something that transcends conventional boundaries. I have always appreciated proper rhyme and verse, no matter which medium it chooses.

Are you saying that you still the ability hear music?

Of course! And so can most of my contemporaries. You see, the sound of beautiful music has always helped us “rest” peacefully, that is until instrumental sounds started winning the age-old battle between melody and lyrics.

Now that is something you will need you to explain.

Certainly. In most popular music, there are two components, namely the lyrics and the accompanying melody. In theory, they should complement each other by creating a synergy that becomes greater than their individual parts. I believe the trend in question started in the 1950s when the cacophony of the music began to overshadow the song's lyrics. It was then that audiences had to



essentially “listen through” the music to understand the words. In many cases, it was hard to determine the words of the song being sung.

Of course! I remember my father criticizing early rock and roll songs. He would always say that he never could understand the words. I guess he was right. The music drowned out the lyrics.

Precisely! And that is why it happened.

And that is why *what* happened?

Meaning how songwriters were able get away with writing dreadful lyrics or squeezing words into couplets that obviously did not rhyme. If you cover up the lyrics, you can bloody well put anything into those lines. No one will know, or more precisely, nobody will even care as long as the music sounds good. As a writer, I put a great deal of thought into what I put on parchment. It was the only medium I had. Precise rhymes inserted into stanzas of iambic pentameter produced their own form of music.



Now to the key question. What is your opinion of the “girl” and “world” forced rhyme as in *Come on girl, You’re my world*? There are literally thousands of songs written where songwriters attempt to rhyme these two words. Today, it is so common that most people don’t really notice those words do not rhyme.

Rubbish, pure rubbish! Come on girl, you’re my worl . . . duh. You must be bloody kidding. Those words obviously don’t rhyme! All one has to do is listen to the way that phrase sounds. Did somebody forget to tell those clueless songwriters that there is a “D” at the end of the word world? Personally, I would never waste my time inking my quill for such nonsense.

Will, I happen to agree with you on that assessment. There’s absolutely no excuse for bad or forced rhymes . . .



Robert, I sincerely apologize, but I’m afraid I need to conclude this session prematurely. It appears that some inconsiderate audiophile is playing *Hey Jude* by the Beatles at an excessively loud volume.

That is not a problem on this end. I still hear you clearly. Wasn’t that song a major hit by the Beatles?

The problem is not contained in the essence of the song. The basic lyrics are fine. Sir Paul McCartney began that song the right way, but somewhere along the way, he

must have been distracted. The issue I have is with that ridiculous chorus. They repeat the words “Nah nah nah nah nah nah, nah nah nah, hey Jude” sixteen straight times! I’ve got to get something to cover what’s left of my ears. I bid thee adieu. Parting is such sweet sorrow . . . Click.

That was an amazing interview! William Shakespeare himself answering my questions. Too bad he had to go so soon. I was barely halfway through my list. I always thought that the repetitive chorus of *Hey Jude* by the Beatles was needless repetition to the point of ad nauseam. Wasn’t it one of those songs you wished you could push a button and fast forward to the end every time it played, especially when that “Nah nah nah nah nah nah, nah nah nah, hey Jude” part came up? Now, Mr. Shakespeare had a valid point when it came to the way the music can overwhelm and sometimes mask the real words of songs. Do any of these verses sound familiar?

- **Madonna: Like a Virgin**
Like a virgin touched for the thirty-first time. (Like a virgin touched for the very first time.)
- **Bee Gees: Stayin' Alive**
Sayin a lie, Sayin a lie. (Stayin alive, stayin alive.)
- **Smokey Robinson: Second That Emotion**
I suck at that emotion. (I second that emotion.)
- **Creedence Clearwater Revival: Bad Moon Rising**
There's a bathroom on the right. (There's a bad moon on the rise.)
- **Monkees: I'm A Believer**
Then I saw her face. Now I'm gonna leave her. (I saw her face. Now I'm a believer.)
- **Jimi Hendrix: Purple Haze**
'Scuse me, while I kiss this guy. ('Scuse me, while I kiss the sky.)
- **Rolling Stones: Beast of Burden**
I'll never leave your pizza burnin'. (I'll never be your beast of burden.)



Yes, these types of malapropisms happen when you hear a song and can't make out exactly what is being vocalized. Your mind simply fills in the spaces with words that sound like they belong. How many of these have you sung incorrectly?

Call it progress

Things have obviously changed since the days of William Shakespeare, and even since 1909 when *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* was written and later recorded on that scratchy Edison cylinder. Music production has become far more sophisticated, with the introduction of synthesizers and digital recording techniques. We now hear so much more acoustically. But when it comes to the words of those songs, sadly, the

quality of their lyrics has fallen far behind the sound of music in that two horse race. Their substance is clearly less important than the sound and the beat. Will Shakespeare was right when he stated, "If you drown out the lyrics, you can bloody well put anything into those lines." Perhaps that is why instrumentals and classical music, like the classics in literature, have managed to withstand the test of time and will continue to do so.

That's why we have choices. There are no mandates that force us to listen to a certain type of music or read particular authors or books. Those decisions are ours, and should always remain that way. Today, we still have music with bad rhymes, and that trend isn't going away any time soon. A quick assessment of anyone's music collection will bear this out.

Nursery rhymes have always been popular. Cultural, moral and social issues provided a basis for their creation. Today, those rhymes rarely relate to current day life, and often they make no sense at all. The catchy rhythm of the verses and the rhyme of the words have long been attractive to parents and children, and many have been passed on from generation to generation. Did this well-known nursery rhyme ever make sense to you?



*Rock-a-by baby
On the tree top,
When the wind blows
The cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks,
The cradle will fall,
And down will fall baby
Cradle and all.*

Nobody I've known has ever placed their child in a cradle, climbed a tree, and balanced that small crib between two branches waiting for the wind to blow. Child Protective Services would have a field day with that one!

That, in effect, is what we have with many contemporary music lyrics. If the tune has a unique sound, is catchy, and you can "dance to it," people will listen. We have experienced a true paradigm shift in this dimension. That's progress, but there is still hope. Somewhere embedded deep in the minds of people who truly understand our language is the desire and the ability to create not only great music, but also lyrics that fit proper form and function.

Count me in as one of them. What about you?

*"They say I'm old fashioned, and live in the past, but **sometimes** I think progress progresses too fast!"*

- Dr. Seuss