

The Man of Double Deed

BY ANONYMOUS

There was a man of double deed,
Who sowed his garden full of seed;
When the seed began to grow,
'Twas like a garden full of snow;
When the snow began to melt,
'Twas like a ship without a belt;
When the ship began to sail,
'Twas like a bird without a tail;
When the bird began to fly,
'Twas like an eagle in the sky;
When the sky began to roar,
'Twas like a lion at my door;
When my door began to crack,
'Twas like a stick across my back;
When my back began to smart,
'Twas like a penknife in my heart;
And when my heart began to bleed,
'Twas death, and death, and death indeed.

The Man of Double Deed is a nursery rhyme attributed to an anonymous author.

The earliest recorded version of it is found in a 1784 collection entitled "Gamer Gurton's Garland. As a child, this poem fascinated me, and I would often ask my mother to read it. My fascination did not focus on the morbid ending, but how the narrative of the poem moved on in an nonsensical manner without reasonable causality.

When considering this poem, it is important to determine what a man of double deed might be.

I have understood double deed as doing something but not in the right way. Thus, because of the poor choices, disastrous consequences follow. A second perspective (Oswald, 2013) is that

we are all men of double deed as we are able to live our daily lives and maintain a separate mental state through imagination or daydreaming.

Imagination is needed to explore this poem, since it moves from rhyming couplet to rhyming couplet in inexplicable ways. There is no direct causality that we can understand and so we are left trying to compare the likenesses of the similes through an abstract lens of feelings and rhyme.

The poem is largely a collection a verb in the passive aspect (began) and similes. In CFLAT, this rather appropriately falls under D (Cohesion/Simple) and then flips to E (Content/Abstract).

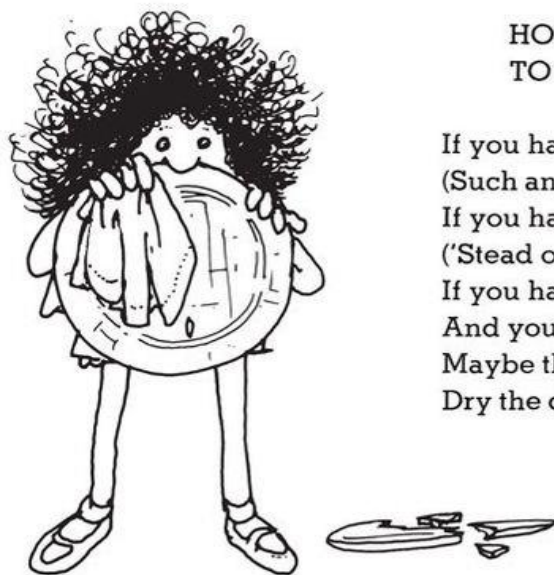
Perhaps the most powerful part of the poem is how, the similes, serve to unsettle, rather than clarify. Early similes like a “bird without a tail” or “a ship without a belt” sound strange and unsettle the reader. Does a missing tail preclude a bird from flying? Will a ship without a belt lose its siding? This expression could refer to the naval term of calling metal armour that is placed around a ship a “belt”. Even if we take that interpretation, that means that when the garden’s snow melted, the garden was vulnerable the way a ship would be without armour. Not the typical view of a healthy garden.

It’s possible that *The Man of Double Deed* is simply a warning to children for the misfortune that befalls a person who doesn’t complete his tasks in the prescribed way. After all, this is a nursery rhyme and it is likely that caregivers were reading it to children. The subject of the poems moves from being a man, to a garden, to the author in the first person speaking of his death. This refocusing of the poem might be to suggest that if we are not careful, we all have the capacity to become men of double deed. One small error can quickly spiral out of control and soon the harm can be revisited upon us.

Still, that feels facile and the poem's ability to fascinate adults for many years speaks to a deeper, more universal message. In each of our lives we have taken steps that, unbeknownst to us have pushed us into new and unexpected situation. To look back and try to ascribe reason to the path most of us have travelled would be like trying to explain the connection between the rhyming couplets in *The Man of Double Deed*. Instead, we move through life, aware a narrative that we seem to be forced along, from one seminal event to another. The only reliable experience after so much excitement and suffering is "death, and death, and death indeed."

Resources

I would like to use this poem to explore the larger theme of choices and the effects they have on us and others. As such, I have chosen two other poems that touch on that theme. The first is *How Not to Have to Dry the Dishes* by Shel Silverstein.



HOW NOT TO HAVE TO DRY THE DISHES

If you have to dry the dishes
(Such an awful, boring chore)
If you have to dry the dishes
(Stead of going to the store)
If you have to dry the dishes
And you drop one on the floor—
Maybe they won't let you
Dry the dishes anymore.

The second poem is *Warning* by Leonard Cohen.

Warning

If your neighbour disappears
O if your neighbour disappears
The quiet man who raked his lawn
The girl who always took the sun

Never mention it to your wife
Never say at dinner time
Whatever happened to that man
Who used to rake his lawn

Never say to your daughter
As you're walking home from church
Funny thing about that girl
I haven't seen her for a month

And if your son says to you
Nobody lives next door
They've all gone away
Send him to bed with no supper

Because it can spread, it can spread
And one fine evening coming home
Your wife and daughter and son
They'll have caught the idea and will be gone.

– Leonard Cohen, from *Let Us Compare Mythologies*

Both of these poems highlight the impact small decisions and observations can have on your life and those around you.

Resources specific to *The Man of Double Deed* include this drawing by Paula Rego. This comes from a series focused on nursery rhyme that Ms. Rego did for her niece.



Duncan Gibson

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Also, this recording of Alice Oswald reading the *Man of Double Deed* and explaining her attachment to the poem offers some fascinating insights into the piece.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/feb/22/alice-oswald-poem-man-double-deed-podcast>