

Words have power. They have the power to stir us up or tear us down. If I were to say “I have a dream” out of context and without inflections, those words would still evoke an emotion within you. What that emotion is will depend upon your experiences as part of the human race. If I create words and then connect them with music, I’ve added another layer of emotion and power to the words. Consider these words, in this order: “He’s a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody.” I bet you the tune that connects this phrase with The Beatles is now in your head!

I can also connect words with art, like illustrations of a story. I can even create meaning by the type of font I select or how I arrange words on a page. Some fonts are instantly recognizable because they’ve been ingrained into our heads and connected to a particular meaning. *What if I switched to this font?* Do you have a sudden craving for *CocaCola*?! Or **What if I switched to this font? What skyrockets to your mind?**

Children’s books and stories have long connected words with art in order to create a dynamic, interactive play between text and readers. Many of the children’s books in our latest exhibit, *Play by Design: The World of Children’s Books*, do this very well. One early example of a kind of whimsical typography is “A Mouse’s Tale,” a poem published in the form of a dangling mouse tail in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

We’ve long known that Charles Dodgen, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll, was a mathematician as well as a story-teller. What we didn’t realize until more recently however, is that in true math geek fashion, Carroll created a fantastic four-way multi-media pun in “A Mouse’s Tale.” The tale, in the form of a rhyme, took the form of a visual tail, but the pun didn’t stop there.

In 1991 two unlikely scholars, high school students from New Jersey, put two and two together (so to speak) and discovered the four-way pun in Carroll’s second version of “A Mouse’s Tale.” The boys took the poem and set it in traditional stanza form. What they found was that “each stanza takes the form of a mouse, with two short lines forming the body and the third, longer line forming the tail” (New York Times, 1991).

The two teenagers, Gary Graham and Jeffrey Maiden, explain the four-way pun in their article: “Thus, the Mouse’s Tale in ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ includes four puns, (1) the word ‘tale’ signifies the story the mouse is telling, but includes the tail visually; (2) the word ‘tail’ signifies the tail of the mouse, but includes the tale it tells; (3) the tale is told in the poetic form of the tail-rhyme; and (4) the line structure of the triplets (two short lines, then a longer line) resembles the shape of a mouse” (Weil, 1991).

For those of us who don’t know what a tail (or tailed) rhyme is, *Encyclopedia Britannica* comes to the rescue: “Tail rhyme, also called tailed rhyme, a verse form in which rhymed lines such as couplets or triplets are followed by a tail—a line of different (usually shorter) length that does not rhyme with the couplet or triplet” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2016)

Martin Gardner, a renowned mathematician and authority on Carroll, also corroborated the students’ findings: “It now seems extremely likely that Carroll knew about tail-rhymes and did the writing of one with intention” (New York Times, 1991).

Okay, I admit it. I’m a math and typography geek, so Lewis Carroll hits the sweet spot for me in *A Mouse’s Tale*. I hope you’ll go see the exhibit, *Play by Design: The World of Children’s Books* at the Bentley Rare Book Gallery. I bet you’ll find lots of fun and whimsical things to allow you to get your geek on, just like I have.

To learn more about the four-way pun mentioned in this post, try these links:

[New York Times \(May 1, 1991\) -- Tale in Tail\(s\): A Study Worthy of Alice's Friends](#)

[Cornelia Weil’s 1991 write-up in the Messenger \(University of Delaware\) about Graham and Maiden’s Discovery](#)

[Tail rhyme. \(2016\). In Encyclopædia Britannica.](#)