



# Reading the Poem

## Wynken, Blynken and Nod

### The Poet

Eugene Field (1850-1895) is not as famous as his poems. Only a small number of people recognise his name. Yet everyone knows 'Wynken, Blynken and Nod'.

He was born in Saint Louis (Missouri), in the heart of the American mid west. His early life had its fair share of tragedy. A younger sister died, and then Eugene's beloved mother. He and his brother were sent off to live with a cousin, in Massachusetts. He wrote his first poem about the family dog, at the age of nine. His father was to die a few years later.

He was educated at several private schools, and then a number of universities. Field was not a committed student. He loved to write, but found the coursework boring. After eventually graduating, and a trip to Europe, he settled back in the mid west, finding work as a journalist. In 1875, he married Julia Comstock. They had eight children.

Field came to be known for his humorous newspaper articles. He was promoted, and was soon working as an editor. He began to write poetry on the side, and is now remembered for works such as 'Little Boy Blue' (not the nursery rhyme, the sentimental verse about a child's death) and 'The Sugar Plum Tree'. 'Wynken, Blynken and Nod' is a celebrated example of his simple, charming work.



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'**Wynken, Blynken and Nod**' is a lovely bedtime fantasy. The poem is in the same tradition that produced 'The Owl and the Pussycat' and even (though it is a prose work) the flying scenes in *Peter Pan*. There are strong elements of the lullaby about it – not only in the lovely rhythms, but in the suggestion that the whole experience is a dream.

The magical characters (Wynken, Blynken and Nod) sail off into the sky in a boat which is a wooden shoe. The sky is a vast sea, full of fish. They converse with the moon and sail among the stars, and put out their nets – a metaphor for collecting dreams ('twas a dream they dreamed /Of sailing that beautiful sea...'). The poem is full of delicious imagery: a river of crystal light, a sea of dew, nets of silver and gold, twinkling foam, rock[ing] in the misty sea. There may be a nineteenth century sentimentality about it all, but it is certainly lush and comforting. If a child's bedtime poem can't be sweet, what can?



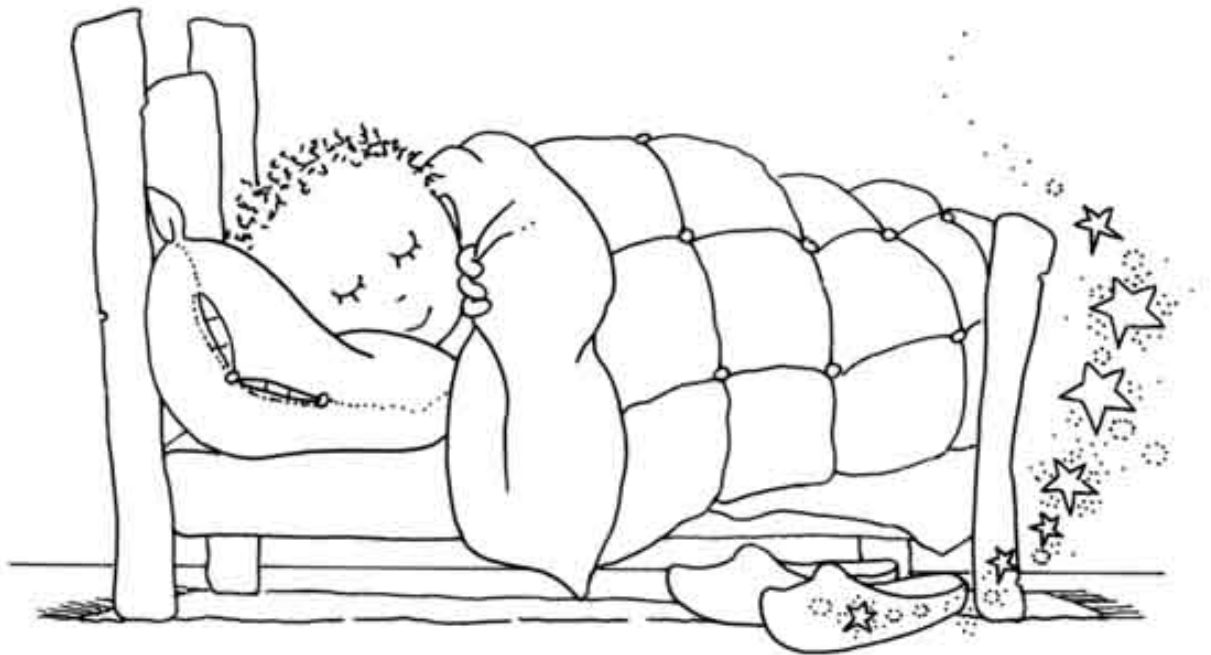
In the last verse, there is a revelation – or joke. We learn that the story and its characters have a secret code: 'wynken' and 'blynken' are eyes and 'nod' the (nodding) head of the child being lulled to sleep by its mother.

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The poem has quite a sophisticated structure. Each of the four stanzas start with eight lines in the pattern **a/b/a/b/c/d/c/d** – followed by another ‘d’ rhyme and the seven syllables ‘finale’ – which is repeated each time, and is the title of the poem. The lines are not of a regular length – but have between six and ten syllables each, in what is roughly an iambic (soft/hard) pattern.

Why is this poem included? Because it is famous, and very charming. It is a good example of one of the most ancient uses of poetry – to paint word pictures, and play with sounds. The poem should not be over-analysed – or it will lose its sparkle.