Happy Holidays

Art by
Annie Stevens, age 12
We begin with a little holiday trivia: Have you ever noticed that “O Little Town of Bethlehem” can be sung to the tune of the “Theme from Gilligan’s Island”? I’ll just wait here a minute while you sing along to yourself and try it out.

[pause]

It works, doesn’t it? The tunes fit and the stresses in the words fall in the right place.

It seems weird, but this is not as much of a coincidence as it seems. Both songs were written in ballad meter, which has to do with the number of syllables in lines, how they’re stressed, and the rhyme scheme.

The song can be slow or fast, somber or light-hearted, but if it uses ballad meter, it will likely fit either of these tunes, or, for that matter, a lot of other songs that may or may not exist in the same compartment of your brain.

Such as “House of the Rising Sun” and “Amazing Grace,” both of which are also in ballad meter and have interchangeable lyrics and tunes, although, it’s safe to say, not interchangeable themes.

You can even sing “America the Beautiful” to the tune of “Amazing Grace.”

When I was thinking about this, it reminded me of something else I heard somewhere: that pretty much all of Emily Dickinson’s poems could be sung to the tune of “The Yellow Rose of Texas.”

Here—try it out on the first verse of one of her most well known poems:

Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me;  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.

continued on page 28
Purchase of tags, cookies, more support Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt

The annual Friends of Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt’s Holiday Project is under way. A variety of cards (including photo cards), gift tags, wrapping paper, all designed by young patients and their siblings are for sale. Other holiday gifts for sale include Christie Cookie tins, winter decaf coffee, and holiday java coffee.

To see designs and order cards, visit http://www.vanderbiltchildrens.org/holidayproject, or phone 343-8660 for more information or ordering assistance.

Turkey giveaway slated for Friday, Dec. 17

This year’s Vanderbilt holiday turkey giveaway for full-time and part-time faculty and staff will take place on Friday, Dec. 17, at Langford Auditorium. Hours of the giveaway are from 6 a.m. to midnight, said Trish Stapp, director of Medical Center Special Events.

To add to the celebratory atmosphere, there will be entertainment throughout the day.

The turkey giveaway is for both Medical Center and University employees, and there will be a lot of people, a lot of turkeys, and a lot going on—so there are some rules that everybody must follow to make things move smoothly.

In order to pick up your holiday turkey, you must show your Vanderbilt photo badge. One turkey per person.

In addition to the turkey, employees will receive a scratch-off ticket. Winning tickets will be good for a gift card from Kroger or HoneyBaked Ham.

There will be no rain checks or organized make-ups for people who aren’t at work that day, so if you plan to be off, it’s a good idea to plan to come by to pick up your turkey. Also, it’s important to remember that each person must pick up his or her turkey in person; a co-worker or family member cannot pick up a staff member’s turkey.

For vegetarians or those who dislike turkey, there will be a limited number of Tofurkey Dinners. If you’d like to pick up one of these, it’d be a good idea to come early, because these will be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.

Canned food donations will be accepted, and anybody who donates will receive a “holiday token.”

Unclaimed turkeys will be donated to the Second Harvest Food Bank.

A “turkey shuttle” will run that day between Kirkland Hall and Medical Center North (7 a.m. to 7 p.m.), as well as between the 25th Avenue Garage and Medical Center North (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.). Regular shuttle routes will also be in effect. The Round Wing drop-off will be closed on Friday, December 17 except for patient access, mobility-impaired employees, and shuttles. Special needs parking will be available adjacent to Eskind Library.

Please contact Natasha Johnson for advance alternative arrangements or more information, at Natasha.johnson@vanderbilt.edu.
Again, it works. The peppy tune is completely out of step with the subject matter, but completely in step with the rhythm of the words. The meter has nothing to do with the speed or tone of the music or the meaning of the words, only the timing and stress of the syllables.

The song or poem can be religious, patriotic, popular or even inane; the meter doesn’t care.

And, if you’ve been reading carefully, it will now come as no surprise to you that “Amazing Grace,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” “America the Beautiful,” and “House of the Rising Sun” can all be sung to the “Theme from Gilligan’s Island.”

If this isn’t enough of a musical and cultural collision in your brain, it’s a rare Baby Boomer who doesn’t know dozens of songs by heart that use ballad meter: Billy Joel’s “Piano Man,” the Coke commercial song “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” Bob Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.” Even other Christmas songs, such as “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.”

Let’s just take some first lines and see how the words to each fit each other’s tunes. Hum with me:

“Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale...”

“O little town of Bethlehem...”

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound...”

“There is a house in New Orleans...”

“I’d like to teach the world to sing...”

This knowledge lends itself to many disturbing ideas for caroling this season.

• You can sing several Christmas songs to the tunes of other Christmas songs, seriously confusing the people who hear you caroling.

• You can sing several Christmas songs to the same Christmas tune, seriously boring the people who hear you caroling.

• Or you can sing everything to the tune of the “Theme from Gilligan’s Island,” and seriously freak out the people who hear you caroling.

I trust you to do the right thing.

Research information from Wikipedia and Cecil Adams’ “The Straight Dope” were used in this column. Along with vague recollections from long ago English classes.

Follow Wayne on Twitter: @woodw

Holiday time is a good time to check out Discount Program

The Vanderbilt Faculty and Staff Discount Program, also known as the Perqs program, provides a listing of businesses offering reduced prices or special offers to Vanderbilt employees.

The discounted goods range from Apartments to Rental Cars to Theme Park admissions.

The list is updated throughout the year, and can be viewed online at http://hr.vanderbilt.edu/benefits/perqs.htm. There is also always a link to the discount program through the House Organ website at http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan/.

Pets next time

The pictures of employee pets—all those slobbering dogs, cats curled up in bathroom sinks, unblinking fish, and the rest—will be printed in the February 2011 issue of House Organ, which will be on the stands the morning of Friday, Feb. 4.

We should hasten to add that the deadlines for entries has passed, so if you didn’t get your beast entered for that issue, keep in mind the call for entries for 2012 will be printed in the September 2011 issue.