

“Identifying the Characteristics of a Nonsense Poem and of a Limerick in Edward’s Lear writings”

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Abstract

“Limerick”, a name that no one knows why this name, who invented the form or when they were first composed. But we know that it is strongly rooted in British culture. It experienced a resurgence in popularity in 1846, with the publication of collection of Edward Lear, Book of Nonsense (Lear 1846). This literary genre is very purely “English”. Poems that speak of theaters. Many playwrights handle a “poem language” or write dramatic poems. A considerable number of poems also work well on stage. If you enjoy poetry at all, you will know William Shakespeare, who practically invented drama and poetry in the English language. Limericks are easy to write, fun and consist of (5) lines. Lear, recognized as the father of the limerick poetic form, made it popular, among many others. Let’s make sure we appreciate the components of these short poems and the pleasure we get from them.

Keywords: limerick, characteristics, nonsense, poem, theatre

Résumé

« Limerick », un nom que personne ne sait pourquoi ce nom, qui a inventé la forme ou quand ils ont été composés pour la première fois. Mais nous savons qu’il est fortement ancré dans la culture britannique. Il connaît un regain de popularité en 1846, avec la publication de recueil d’Edward Lear, Book of Nonsense (Lear 1846). Ce genre littéraire très purement anglais. Des poèmes qui parlent de théâtres. De nombreux dramaturges manient une “langue poème” ou écrivent des poèmes dramatiques. Un nombre considérable de poèmes passent également très bien à la scène. Si vous appréciez un tant soit peu la poésie, vous connaissez forcément William Shakespeare, qui a pratiquement inventé le théâtre et la poésie en langue anglaise. Les Limericks sont faciles à écrire, amusants et composés de cinq

(5) lignes. Lear, reconnu comme le père de la forme poétique du limerick, l'a rendu populaire, parmi tant d'autres. Veillons apprécier les composants de ces courts poèmes et le plaisir que l'on se fait.

Mots clés : limerick, caractéristiques, non-sens, poème, théâtre.

Introduction

Limericks are light, nonsensical verses of five lines in which the first, second- and fifth-lines rhyme which each other and the third and fourth lines, shorter in form, make up a rhymed couplet. The rhyme scheme can be represented by the formula **aabaa**. Limericks are named after the city or country Ireland; we do not have a clear idea as to why they are so named. Theories are that the names come from a group of poets who wrote in Limerick in the 18th century. The first appeared in books published in 1820 and 1821, and Edward Lear popularized the form in a collection published in 1846.

A Limerick incites to force the line in five verses; everything must be said. Limericks like poems can be used in a reader's theater approach to give students the chance to playfully interpret a passage in a mock-dramatic oral recitation. To present limericks, the use of following guidelines suggested by John Barry in the January 1977 issue of the forum:

- 1- Speak so that every word is heard
- 2- Vary the speed of presentation
- 3- Vary the tone of voice to fit the meaning of the message (some parts may be neutral in tone, some joking, some mock serious.)
- 4- Vary th volume of voice
- 5- Decide what the emphatic words are and emphasize them
- 6- Pause in appropriate places. Pause before emphatic words, before and after direct speech, and before any kind of climax
- 7- Do not recite mechanically, or exaggerate the rhythm of the poem
- 8- Do not pause automatically, at the end of lines if the meaning does not require

Example: When he was called Goat (a)
His opponent answered in the name of Tall (a)

To whom is the crowd willing to bet? (b)

The Goat is still confident and neglecting threat (b)

Forgetting his concern and goal (a)

In some Limericks, the last words of the lines may be standard abbreviations. The last words and rhyme. They are contrived abbreviations devised so that they bear the same relationship to the word (or phrase) they stand for as the real abbreviation in the first does to the word (or phrase) it stands for.

Example: Asked to give his ASL, (a)

A real man he's decided 2B" (a)

That was his first day in a date, (b)

So impatient he could not wait, (b)

He said: "this is different day from hustle" (a)

Many critics have interpreted the nonsense verse of both Lear and Lewis Carroll in this way, seeing it as a partial subversion of Victorian norms and mores, albeit with the *status quo* often being restored (we can see this in Lear's limericks: those who behave oddly and step outside of Victorian convention are often punished).

To begin with the topic, I will mention those authors who developed the writing of the Limerick. In addition, I will demonstrate the rhyme scheme of a limerick. Furthermore, I will answer the questions about the form of theatrical poetry taking William Shakespeare as an example. And lastly, to present the writer-poet and king of Limerick, Edward Lear.

I. Limerick Writers

It is obvious that it is the Anglo-Saxon literature, which is best informed about Limerick. Limericks are often of a literary nonsense. Literary nonsense (or nonsense literature) is a broad categorization of literature that balances elements that make sense with some that do not, with the effect of subverting language conventions or logical reasoning. Even though the most well-known form of literary nonsense is nonsense verse, the genre is present in many forms of literature. An excess of meaning, rather than a lack of it often cause the effect of nonsense. Its humour is derived from its nonsensical nature, rather: than wit or 'joke' of a "punchline". by chance, writer

and poet. He could appear in the Guinness Book of Records with his life alone.

With Greshon Legman, the description may be from another edition of this product. Legman finds that the exchange of limericks is almost exclusive to comparatively well-educated males, women figuring in limericks almost exclusively as “villains or victims”. The most prized & limericks incorporate a kind of twist, which may be revealed in the final line or lie in the way the rhymes are often intentionally tortured, or both. Many Limericks show some form of internal rhyme, alliteration or assonance, or some element of word play. Verses in form are sometimes combined with a refrain or form a limerick song, a traditional humorous drinking song often with obscene verses.

Rudyard Kipling another limerick writer, the famous British writer of the late 19th and early 20th century, who achieved fame because of his short stories and children’s books, also tried his hand at limerick Poetry. Here is an interesting example of Limerick poetry from Rudyard Kipling :

*There³ was a small boy of Quebec.
Who was buried in snow to his neck?
When asked are, “Are you friz ?”
He replied, “Yes, I is !*

Harold Bloom suggested that Shakespeare may have been the author of “Tom O’Bedlam’s Song”. If so that would move Shakespeare up to the best limerick writers.

The supporters of Limerick poetry take up the name of Shakespeare a lot in this regard. And they are surely justified; Shakespeare indeed took up the rhythm of Limerick poetry and incorporated it while writing down the drinking song of Stephano in his famous play of *The Tempest*. Besides that, he also used the limerick poetry in his memorable dramas of *Othello* and *King Lear*.

In the third scene of the 2nd Act oin Lear’s 1846 book, *we* see the wonderful use of limerick Poetry by Shakespeare:

*“And let me the canakin clink clink:
And let me the canakin clink
A soldier’s⁴ a man*

³ BLISS, Carman, & all, eds. *The World’s Best Poetry*. Volume I. Of Home: of Friendship. 1904

⁴ LEAR, Edward, 1846, *A Book of Nonsense*, ISBN 0-203-36179-2 Master e-book ISBN

*A life's but a pan
Why, then, let a soldier drink''*

The renowned author of the classic *Alice in Wonderland* used the Limerick Poetry as well because besides being a writer for children, he was a comic writer as well. Here is an example of the way Lewis Carroll incorporated Limerick poetry:

*‘There was a young lady of station⁵
‘I love man’’ was her sole exclamation
But when men cried, ‘You flatter’’
‘She replied, ‘Oh ! no matter !
Isle of Man is the true explanation.’’’*

Born in 1835, this famous American author is known for his works for children and for the genre of humour. Here is a celebrated Mark Twain Limerick poem:

*‘A ⁶man hired by John Smith and Co.
Loudly declared that he’d tho.
Men that he saw
Dumping dirt near his door
The drivers, herefore, didn’t do.’’’*

It is a poem which closest metre is an iambic poem, the type is tercets and the rhyme scheme is **aaXXa**.

Ogden Nash holds a similar place of distinction in the pantheon of limerick writers. The thing Nash did wonderfully well was ignore & the “rules” that often result in stiffly corseted formal poems. Nash poems tend to be funny, irreverent, whimsical and “loosey&-goosy”. Here are a few of Nash’s best limericks and limerick-like poems:

*A flea and a fly in a flue
Were imprisoned, so what could the do?
Said the fly, ‘said the flea.
So they flew through a flaw in the flue*

Ogden Nash

*The turtle lives ‘twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex
I think it clever of the turtle*

⁵ <https://npdsurrey.wordpress.com>, Surrey Libraries, 2016

⁶ <https://www.writeawriting.com/poetry/limerick-poems-famous-examples-limerick-poetry/>

In such a fix to be so fertile

Ogden Nash

While most limericks are humorous, the form has been adapted for more serious purposes. Thus, not all limericks are humorous. Take, for instance, this inspirational limerick-like poem recited by Yolanda Renee King, the 9-year-old granddaughter of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, where students activists and supporters rallied against gun violence:

Spread the word!

Have you heard?

All cross the nation,

We are going to bee

A great generation!

II. Rhyming a Poem (Limerick)

The Limerick genre unfolds on a temporal axis because it as its history and it unfolds on a spatial axis, conquering more and more distant areas. It is the intercultural genre par excellence, because it visits and mixes thee different cultures, which through it assert their identities. It is a poetic place where national identities meet and bicker, making fun of themselves and others. It has a third dimension: the axis of different-social, linguistic and socio-cultural levels, we could then speak of variable degree of “poeticity”. It remains a popular genre. Limerick should not be seen in what for some might sound like a “bad” genre... which nevertheless remains a game with words, more or less fine.

Limericks all follow the same structure and pattern, which sets them apart from other poetic forms and makes them easily identifiable. We have about six defining characters of a limerick.

- 1- A limerick that consists of five lines arranged in one stanza
- 2- The one which the first, second line and fifth lines end in rhyming words
- 3- A limerick that its third and fourth lines must rhyme
- 4- A limerick that third and fourth lines have three anapests (da dum da da dum da da dum)
- 5- The rhythm of a limerick may be anapestic, which means two unstressed syllables are followed by a third stressed syllable

6- The third and fourth lines have two anapests (da dum da da dum)

III Tricks on a Limerick

The origin of Limerick is the absurd (“nonsense” in English) you must read Lear’s limericks to appreciate first the origin... As one should probably read Basho for the haikus. Limerick has never been taken seriously (and so much the better) it is a bit of play with words to make fun of people, life in general...in a subtle way (if possible). The most common hypothesis from the origin of limerick is: limerick poetic from defined from the song: ‘*Will you come up to Limerick*’, ‘Thee only problem is that this song is not a Limerick.

So the origin of Limerick is not known but it is likely that there is a connection with the town (o surrounding area) of Limerick on the Shannon Estuary in (Southern). Ireland either by preference to a text or simply because the first Limericks came from there. Apparently, one can find Limericks (or pseudo-limericks) in Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Othello and in other rhymes or drinking songs of this time but the first Limericks, which cannot be disputed as such, are published in 1820 and 1821 under form of children’s poems. They are used for fun by taking a childish point of view and making fun of this overly serious and off-putting adult world.

There are two series of Limericks, one on women, the other on men with references to the scene. A way to learn geography a way and probably the adult world too! It sounds like almanac sayings and allows children to associate new words and funny situations. A fun way to learn in a way especially that they were accompanied by illustrations. However, the limerick is best known thanks to Lear’s who wrote between 1836 and 1846 his first series of Limerick.

Each poem is also illustrated by Lear himself in the version & published in 1846. Lear’s limerick and has particular characteristics that made it so charming and unfortunately the charm of these Limericks could not be rediscovered by others. The limericks write stories that are absurd by the situation or by the arrangement and choice of words. In a way, Lear was a persecutor to Dadaism, surrealism, Beckett and Lonesco. Of course, 5 little verses here or

there do not form a poetic theory, it is just a fun way to be able to understand the world around us, and to make fun of it. This environment was very closed and restrictive during this victorian period, therefore, this poetic form was quite successful quickly to its publication. The Limerick form can be traced back several hundred years, and has a long association with humour and satire. The poem “The Doubt of Future Enemies,” composed by Elizabeth I of England, has a metrical structure that anticipates the Limerick, although the rhyme scheme is incomplete.

The origin of the actual name of Limerick for this type of poem is noscure. Its use was documented in England in 189 (New English Dictionary) and in America in 1902. It is generally considered a reference to the city of Limerick in Ireland and may derive from an earlier form of nonsense verse board game that traditionally included a refrain that ended “Come all the way to Limerick ?” (In reference to Limerick, Ireland).

IV. Limerick in Theater Approach

The 16th-century language of Shakespeare is not always easy for modern readers to decipher, and yet his insights into human nature are timeless. By transcribing these messages into whimsical limericks, It only makes them more accessible.

If you have any appreciation for poetry, you must have some familiarity with William Shakespeare, who invented English-language drama and poetry, as we know it.

Making a theatre show from a poetic text is something else entirely. One often have to create a small world quite prosaic which function will be to set the poem.

King Lear

The fortunes of families they fall and they rise
A king driven mad and a dad with no eyes
So last shall be first
And the best gets the worst

Now who is the foolish and which one’s the wise ?

Among other things, this late tragedy of Shakespeare’s explores the loss of eyesight, the reversal of roles and the reversal of fortunes. The Fool at one point says to King Lear : “*Dost thou know the difference,*

my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet one ?” (Act I, scene iv, line 137). The playwright of the theater of the absurd mix comedy and tragedy in order to make the spectator uncomfortable, so that he becomes aware of the strangeness of the world. They also reject any psychological characterization of the characters: we know little about their lives or their character. Similarly, Cordelia, the most loyal and worth daughter, loses her rightful inheritance, and the kingdom goes to her dishonest sisters. Meanwhile, Gloucester loses her eyesight and King Lear loses his mind.

A great masterpiece of this sort of cherry-picking can be found in the back of the indispensable Edward Lear: *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*, edited by the equally indispensable Vivien Noakes. She has a section, beginning on page 461, titled “Examples of Lear’s Nonsense Similes”—which must have cost an ocean of labor. It’s three-pages-plus of single-spaced type, all of it just Lear signing off letters with things like, “Now my boy I must close this as the Cyclopes used to say of their one eye.” (I must have regifted that a hundred times.) Here are some other specimens⁷:

What is the use of all these revolutions that lead to nothing?
as the displeased turnspit said to the angry cookmaid.

I find my effort vain all vain as the mouse said
when she climbed up as far as the top of the church steeple.

Never mind. They will be useful when I am dead—
those pictures;—as the reflective & expiring bear
thought when he considered that his skin would become muffs.

I will now look over your last letter & make
ozbervatims on its points, as the monkey said when

⁷ *Anthony Madrid lives in Victoria, Texas. His second book of poems is called Try Never (Canarium Books, 2017). He is a correspondent for the Daily.*

he casually sate down on the pincushion, sufficient to the day is the weevil thereof, as the hazelnut said when the caterpillar made a hole in his shell.

I fear I have only the alternative before me of beginning and executing the whole 200 over again, or of giving up my 40 years work, altogether a disgust and humiliation I shrink from, as the snail said when they showed him the saltcellar.

V. Funny Poems by Edward Lear

Edward Lear popularized the limerick with his many contributions to the genre, but he was not the inventor of this beloved form of poetry. But today Edward Lear is best remembered for his children's stories, and best of all perhaps for *The Book of Nonsense*, a collection of humorous, family-friendly limericks published in 1846.

Though they've been around for less time than the Shakespearan sonnet, limericks are a popular form of poetry for different audiences. Though not the first to write or recite them, English poet Edward Lear was famous for popularizing limericks in the nineteenth century. In 1846, he published a volume of his original limericks entitled *A Book of Nonsense*.

The Owl and the Pussycat meant to mean anything? It is simply delightful fantasy (it features anthropomorphic animals, after all : the owl and the pussycat can talk, the owl sings a song and plays the guitar, the pig engages in financial transactions, and the turkey officiates at ceremonies), or it is making a commentary on Victorian society ?

Edward Lear has been called the "father" and the "poet laureate" of the limerick because he helped popularize the form. To be frank, I believe other poets, particularly Ogden Nash, have penned better limericks, but I do admire this one, which has been attributed to Lear :

*There was a young lady of Niger
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger ;
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside,*

And the smile on the face of the tiger.

Attributed to Edward Lear and William and William Cosmo Monkhouse

Here is another Lear limerick that i especially like and admire :

There was an old man in a tree,

Who ^swas horribly bored by a bee.

When they said "Does it buzz ?

Edward Lear

Here is an example of Lear's Limerick which tells an absurd story but in which the reader is taken by surprise surprise with every line. Lovers of Queneau, Desnos or other Tardieu will able to appreciate:

There was a young lady of Portugal

Whose ideas were excessively natical

She climbed up a tree

To examine the sea,

But declared she would never leave Portugal.

Lear's nonsense books were quite popular during his lifetime, but a rumour circulated that "Edward Lear" merely a pseudonym, and the books true author was the man whom Lear had dedicated the works, his patron Earl of Derby. Supporters of this rumour offered as evidence the facts that both were named Edward, and that "Lear" is an anagram of "Earl". Reading and rereading these limericks as unusual as they are beautiful, one cannot help but think of the beautiful fabulettes of Anne Sylvestre, "A lady from Dijon cooked a big turkey...A lady from Calais cooked a big chicken..." (Any resemblance to elected officials from these two regions being purely coincidental). Just like in the limericks a beautiful music comes out of the words.

Nowadays the limerick makers play with words and sometimes very often saucy situations, but complete, logical stories are told and the charm of Lear's limericks is lost. Moreover, Lear's texts also showed that he himself had a big sexual appetite and his limericks can very often be interpreted in this aspect. In particular, many limericks refer to large noses, the ultimate phallic symbol. This saucy character of Limerick grew stronger over the years, but in the 19th century it only corresponded to a minority number of texts. Nowadays in Ireland

^s LEAR, Edward, 1846, A Book of Nonsense, ISBN 0-203-36179-2 Master e-book ISBN

limericks are used in schools for example simply as an educational game. In these cases they are obviously above the belt.

With all due respect to Lear, I am honoured to write a limerick on Lear :

You could never understand the meaning of care
If you do not glance at writings, they fear
Words with sensitivity become artistical
Brains shaking in receiving ideas mystical
When all of them dare put a mask to share
All shall admit that it is in the inspiration of Lear

Lear's poem proposes a variation on the reference versification scheme and rhymes the second, third and fourth lines, Parisot remains faithful to the orthodoxy of the genre, choosing an **AABBA** type rhyme scheme. The rhyming constraint also forces an adaptation of the content of the fourth line, moving from the evocation of a noisy character announced by the term clamour to the antithetical image of the rest of his entourage. This inversion of perspectives has the sole aim of facilitating the return of the rhyme, even if it means taking liberties with the source text, although the objective remains, by keeping the image of the hammer, to keep the spirit as well as the letter of Lear's poem. Sylvère Monod⁹, author of the preface to Parisot's volume, defends this constrained freedom when he explains how the latter had to "*proceed to a creation parallel to that of the original*¹⁰". Ernst Dautel shares this position. To the question, "*Can the limerick be translated?*"

Not only does limerick combine a fanciful content with an extremely specific metric, but this paradoxical character operates at all levels. It manifests itself on the level of versification, which oscillates between the regularity of an invariable pattern and the rupture introduced by shorter verses that rhyme with each other, in the mismatch between the metrical regularity of the poem and the falling effect introduced by the last line, but also in the symmetry of the versification and the

⁹ (cf. Lear / Parisot 1974)

¹⁰ <https://books.openedition.org/pusl/26622?lang=fr>

rhythmic eccentricity. The anapestic rhythm of the limerick is, it is true, both characteristic of the form and unusual in English poetry, where iambic meter remains dominant. Despite its metrical and prosodic regularity, it is therefore eccentric, as are the poem's syntax and punctuation. Similarly, while the humorous dimension of the limerick is largely due to the fact that the visual and aural form of the poem overrides all other considerations, the recurrence of elements such as the proper name (typically that of a city) which is systematically found at the end of the first line is also constitutive of the genre. The real paradox of the limerick is therefore less the contradiction or incongruity between the (absurd) content and the (regular) form of the poem, than the combination of strange and familiar elements that blend on the level of the narrative as well as in the visual aspect and the sound dimension of the text. It is this constant oscillation between variation and repetition that gives the genre such a singular rhythm.

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¹ LEAR, Edward, (1846), A Book of Nonsense, ISBN 0-203-36179-2 Master e-book ISBN

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