Readers who seek to make sense of Edward Lear's nonsense limericks are in danger of putting themselves into the frustrating position of the people who question Lear's man of Sestri:

There was an old person of Sestri,
Who sate himself down in the vestry,
When they said "You are wrong!"--he merely said "Bong!"
That repulsive old person of Sestri. (192)

But if Lear's limericks defy critical interrogation, they do so with a good deal more charm than the repulsive old person of Sestri, because their resistance, unlike his, does not put an end to conversation. On the contrary, their inscrutability instead raises the crucial question of the difference between the meaning of Lear's nonsense and its function. The question I wish to raise here, then, is not what Lear's nonsense means but rather what it does.¹

This important distinction appears, for instance, in a comment Lear made in 1871 regarding some of the reviews of his second volume of nonsense writings: "The critics are very silly to see politics in such bosh: not but that bosh requires a good deal of care, for it is a sine qua non in writing for children to keep what they have to read perfectly clear & bright, & incapable of any meaning but one of sheer nonsense" (Selected Letters 228).² Lear's point is that his nonsense's irrationality is the result of a painstaking, rational process. To attempt to see past the surface of such verse is to ignore precisely what is most important about it, so that such seeing is a way of being blind to its real artistic merit. Indeed, the tension produced by offering multiple invitations to interpretation within a piece of art that at the same time deliberately resists any attempt to make sense of it has been called the essential feature of literary or artistic nonsense in general (Tigges 27).

Yet Lear's emphasis here is not on the general character of nonsense so much as on its appropriateness to a certain audience. "Writing for children," he says, requires one to keep things "perfectly clear & bright." What purpose does this clarity and brilliance serve, and how is it specific to writing for children? One of the "clear & bright" things about Lear's limericks is his highly predictable handling of the form? The first line usually uses the formula "There was an [old / young] [man / lady / person] of [place name]." Lear frequently echoes this formula in the final line: "That [adjective] old man of [place name]." The middle lines usually describe some sort of eccentric behavior on the part of the subject, often accompanied by a response to it by the people around him or her, as in the oft-repeated formula beginning the third line: "When they said." The "old man of Sestri" limerick is a good example of this basic structure. Sometimes the interaction between the eccentric and "the people" extends into the final line, yielding variations on the basic formula: "They [verb] that old man of [place name]" (e.g., "So they smashed that old man of Whitehaven" [39]) or "Which [verb] the people of [place name]" (e.g., "Which distressed all the people of Chertsey" [7]). Thus the rather chaotic interplay between Lear's eccentrics and "them" is tightly contained within the repetitive form, providing a combination of novelty and familiarity that, like much nonsense verse for children, provides the child with a strictly rule-bound, reliable, and therefore reassuring set of boundaries within which to experience the fantastically extravagant and sometimes threatening contents of the poems (Ede 58-60; Kennedy).

The most distinctive feature of Lear's poetic craft in the limericks is his handling of the final line. Here one often finds whatever frightening or violent material the limericks contain, such as the eccentric protagonist being smashed or killed or drowned or choked. The need to control such threatening possibilities may help to explain the curious restraint of Lear's formal handling of the final rhyme. Unlike most later composers of limericks, and in distinction even from the "sick man of Tobago," which Lear cited as the primary model for his limericks,³ Lear almost never tries to deliver a witty or surprising rhyme at the end of a limerick. But this is not to say that the final lines contain no surprises. On the contrary, the adjectives that describe the eccentrics are fabulously various. Sometimes they deliver an appropriate description or judgment, but just as often the description or judgment is mildly or strikingly inappropriate, and on a good number of occasions it is entirely mysterious. For instance:
There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who never knew what he should do;
So he tore off his hair, and behaved like a bear,
That intrinsic Old Man of Peru. (12)

"Intrinsic" neither expresses a judgment nor plausibly describes any of the old man's qualities. It is quite as inscrutable as the man of Sestri's "Bong."

What the use of "intrinsic" achieves, in fact, is precisely the shortcircuiting of interpretation that Lear describes as the "perfectly clear & bright" quality of his verse, that which makes it "incapable of any meaning but one of sheer nonsense." According to one eminent theorist of nonsense, "This is the beginning of nonsense: language lifted out of context, language turning on itself ... language made hermetic, opaque" (Stewart 3). Nonsense, according to Stewart, is language that resists contextualization, so that it refers to "nothing" instead of to the word's commonsense designation. In this way Lear's wildly inappropriate adjectives are paradigmatic instances of one of the fundamental activities the limericks perform: the world of Lear's nonsense is a playground. It separates itself from the "real" world, letting loose a number of possibilities, including dangerous and violent ones, and at the same time disconnecting those possibilities from the real world, that is, from what goes on after the game is over. Thus Lear's artistry is "repulsive," not quite in the unmannersy fashion of the man of Sestri, but in that, like him, it stakes out a territory where being "wrong" is only a way of rhyming with "Bong."

The insulation of the artistic event from its social context is hardly peculiar to children's nonsense verse, however. We enter similarly playful (and, Huizinga argues, quasi-sacred) spaces when we go into an art gallery or a theater. But the distance from the commonsense world achieved in Lear's limericks is not just that of aesthetic contemplation. Although the language of any verbal artifact can be said to play rather than to work insofar as its readers adopt an aesthetic disposition toward it, Lear's limericks direct themselves to a specific audience and function precisely by actively refusing to work as conventional communication. This is not to say that the language of the limericks falls out of referentiality altogether, but rather that the truncated or suspended referentiality of Lear's nonsense is what makes the limericks peculiarly appropriate for children. And to adapt Lear's own critical vocabulary, the limericks' clear but restricted referentiality also makes them not just playful but festive in a full and complex way.

Lear declared both the limericks' intended audience and their festive character on the title page of his Book of Nonsense (1846) with this limerick and its illustration:

There was an old Derry down Derry,
Who loved to see little folks merry;
So he made them a book, and with laughter they shook
At the fun of that Derry down Derry.

The illustration shows the dancing Derry down Derry handing his book to a group of frolicking children. Keeping in mind that most of Lear's limericks were not written with publication in mind, but rather as gifts for specific children, we might ask what relationship between the adult and the children the book is helping to create or mediate. Lear simply calls it "fun" in this limerick, but it is a special kind of fun. The adult dancing amidst the children may be in charge of the situation, since, after all, he wrote the book; or he may be giving up his authority, becoming one of "them," when he hands the book over to the children. The adult's size and dress clearly differentiate him from the children. What is not clear, however, is whether his dancing is a performance for them or an emulation of their excitement, and so, by implication, it remains unclear whether the book is primarily an entertainment for the children or a means of entrance into the children's fun for the adult. The point is not that it is one way or the other, but that both possibilities are offered. The adult's authority is neither protected nor abdicated, but rather suspended, at least for as long as the fun continues.

The suspended hierarchical relation between adult and child suggests social possibilities that move the limericks' fun beyond the formalistic aspects of play as understood by Huizinga and applied by critics such as Sewell and Ede. Instead, their engagement of social convention here resembles the highly charged mode of festivity that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's classic book on Rabelais, was ritualized in the medieval carnival. Bakhtin argues that the carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). The relationship between Derry down Derry and the children is indeterminate, it seems to me, in much the way that social rules and hierarchies were set topsy-turvy during carnival. That is, Lear's verses, like a carnival celebration, clear a space for nonsensical fun by creating a hiatus in social rules and hierarchies, so that for a while it may become hard to tell the difference between us and them, high and low, teacher and student, or even adult and child.

But there is also a crucial difference between the spirit of carnival and Lear's nonsense. If the carnival "offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapitical aspect of the world" and so "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin 6), Lear's nonsense directs its parodic and liberating energies not against the state or the church but rather in less "official" directions. In keeping with the interests of his intended audience, it is the private, domestic realm rather than the public domain that most preoccupies Lear in the limericks. They consistently address some of the most basic social conventions with which children struggle, such as those governing eating, dressing, grooming, and talking. Lear's approach to these conventions is "meta-cultural," in that it manipulates and explores the limits of
social codes (Bouissac). Consequently the limericks tend to expose the arbitrariness or artificiality of convention rather than laying down the law. The limericks on eating, for instance, include stories of starvation and of gluttony, of "old men" who sink into alcoholic depression and of others who enjoy pleasantly recuperative snacks, of accidental cannibalism but also of miraculous cures (such as the man who is cured of the plague by eating a bit of butter).

Within this festive frame it remains unclear whether the children receiving these limericks are supposed to identify with the eccentrics or with the people--or with neither. The people react to the protagonists' antics with delight, curiosity, embarrassment, perplexity, astonishment, solicitude, outrage, and sometimes violent retribution. In fact, the range of behaviors exhibited by the eccentrics is matched in its breadth and unpredictability by the range of attitudes expressed toward them by the other characters, and both the behaviors and the attitudes are as portable and transient as carnival masquerades. This similarity tends to undermine the notion, once popular among critics of Lear, that "they" represent an intolerant social normality and that the eccentrics stand for persecuted individualism, or that the limericks deliver a univocal polemic in favor of the eccentrics' freedom to be themselves or against the people, who often close ranks against Lear's oddballs (Hark, "Edward Lear").

If the boundaries and hierarchies put into play in Lear's carnival are not reliably congruent with the boundaries between the eccentrics and "them," nevertheless they surely refer to social conformity and the conventions that govern manners and private codes of behavior rather than sacrality or legitimacy. They quite often do this by way of a widely prevalent strategy in children's literature: that of inviting identification between humans and animals. For instance:

There was an Old Man in a tree,
Who was horribly bored by a Bee;
When they said, "Does it buzz?"
he replied, "Yes, it does!
It's a regular brute of a Bee!" (7)

The old man, not the bee, is the one who is out of his proper place, perhaps invading the bee's territory, so that the word "brute" in the last line puns on the uncertain distinction the limerick sets up between a social animal and an unsociable human. The illustration emphasizes the similarity between the old man and the bee in a more broadly comic way, since their faces are nearly mirror images of one another, right down to the pipes in their mouths. Perhaps this hints at some hypocrisy in the old man's attitude, and perhaps it also indicates the interchangeability of roles within the limerick's play space. At the very least, the limerick and the illustration cast serious doubt on whatever kind of authority the old man might have to pronounce the bee a "regular brute."

The social dynamics in this limerick involve a contest over who is occupying whose place and who has the right to say what is "regular." Although the limerick's general tenor is antiauthoritarian, the form of authority being satirized does not resemble that of general society toward the eccentric individual nearly as much as it looks like the interaction of an authoritative adult with a child. Or rather, the adult, like Derry down Derry, has been transformed into a comic entertainer, a clown, who mimics the irrationality and hypocrisy of adult authority in the face of the buzzing, childlike bee's own parodic imitation of him.

I am suggesting that the limericks consistently address themselves to the kind of authority adults exercise over children in general, and, more specifically, that the social institution toward which they are primarily directed is the Victorian family. The limericks offer a panoply of interactions between children and adults that refers, both mockingly and at times far more tenderly, to the family. For Lear himself, we can speculate, nonsense enacted an alternative to the parental relationship that some combination of muted homosexuality and serious health problems made psychologically, if not physically, impossible for him. Lear's nonsense was for him a way of cementing a playful, avuncular relationship with the children he met in his travels. Lear's nonsense persona, Derry down Derry, gives way to "Uncle Arly" in Lear's last, most autobiographical poem; and the Lear of the nonsense in general is the one he called an "Adopty Dunce" on the drawings of an alphabet when he presented them, one by one, to a little girl at the hotel they were sharing (Noakes 24344). The old man in the tree, I would argue, has no less entered into a fantasy of family life than the Lear in the self-portrait illustrating the following passage in a letter of 1871: "I think of marrying some domestic henbird & then of building a nest in one of my olive trees, whence I should only descend at remote intervals for the rest of my life" (Selected Letters 236).

Whatever way the limericks may have functioned for Lear, they can be coherently understood as extending to the child reader an invitation to imaginative role-playing. The dramatic game they open up refers predominantly to basic areas of socialization--eating, dressing, grooming, speaking, and so on--and to the kinds of tensions inherent in familial relationships, that is, ones involving obedience and authority, conformity and individuation, nurturance and independence. The limericks treat these relationships in a carnivalesque fashion, using parodic, grotesque, ridiculous, and subversive strategies of representation. Whether the limericks' overall effect is to rehearse rebellion or to provide a safety valve for antiauthoritarian energies seems to be precisely what the form of nonsense refuses to determine. Instead, the limericks' nonsensical resistance to commonsense interpretation draws a kind of magic circle around them, not only setting loose the extravagant energy and exuberant emotions of the nonsense world but also, at the same time, sealing off this world from "real" consequences. The limericks themselves often allude to and, indeed, theorize this magic circle in a quite detailed and often delightful way. Let me now, without presuming to make sense out of Lear's nonsense, try to trace this circle through a series of limericks.
We can begin with another man in a tree:

There was an old man in a tree,
Whose whiskers were lovely to see;
But the birds of the air, pluck'd them perfectly bare,
To make themselves nests in that tree. (191)

The old man in the tree appears to be another comic self-portrait of Lear, and the illustration shows him smiling impishly on his branch while the little birds pluck him bare. Even more explicitly than in the bee limerick, the childlike animals have aggressively set on an adult invading their territory. But this is an unexpectedly tender poem, for it transforms the birds' attack on the old man's "lovely" whiskers into the benevolent activity of nest-building. Thus it rather pointedly reverses the plot of Humpty Dumpty, the nursery rhyme to which the illustration clearly alludes. This is not a cautionary tale about the irremediable consequences of a foolish action. Rather, this poem seems to encourage the child audience's aggressivity in the belief that such comic and aesthetic appropriation of the poem will ultimately have constructive results. The poem represents an adult attitude of optimistic tolerance toward the rambunctious and perhaps unruly children set free to play at nonsense.

At the opposite extreme from this old man's tolerance one finds a didactic adult being subjected to some of Lear's most clear-cut ridicule:

There was an old man of Dumbree,
Who taught little owls to drink tea;
For he said, "To eat mice, is not proper or nice,"
That amiable man of Dumbree. (184)

Here the illustration is particularly relevant. In it the old man of Dumbree has lined up the owls in front of him so that he can amiably instruct them to act in a way that goes against their nature. Lear presents this arrangement in such a way as to emphasize the uniformity being imposed on the owls, so that they turn into a faceless series of "proper" students of etiquette. The old man's authoritarian project is rendered thoroughly ludicrous by his own birdlike posture and beaklike nose. Thus this limerick renders quite explicit the antididactic element implied by the "Old Man in a Tree" reversal of Humpty Dumpty. At the same time, it may preserve some of that poem's tolerance by pronouncing the old man of Dumbree "amiable"; or perhaps this hint of tolerance enters the poem simply by way of the indeterminacy and playfulness enjoyed by the adjective in the final line. The fact that there is really no way of telling whether the limerick's sympathy for the man of Dumbree is congenial or nonsensical is, after all, precisely what keeps Lear's parodic strategy from breaking out of the circle of nonsense and turning into full-fledged, allegorical satire.

The emotional counterpart of the limericks' indeterminacy and tolerance is their strong ambivalence. For example:

There was on old person of Crowle,
Who lived in the nest of an owl;
When they screamed in the nest, he screamed out with the rest,
That depressing old person of Crowle. (195)

The person of Crowle seems to exemplify the quality of nonsense that Bakhtin, speaking of carnival laughter, would call its most egalitarian element, its holism: "It is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. ...This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding." Unlike the laughter of satire, which places the satirist above and in opposition to the object of laughter, this kind of laughter "expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (Bakhtin 1112). But this "depressing" old person's egalitarian laughter also has the appearance of an invasion. The price of its liberating effect on the "old person" may be that it threatens the stability of the social relationships inside the nest. The owls in the illustration (fig. 5) certainly seem to be of two minds about it. The largest ones, apparently assuming the role of parents, glare coldly at the demented-looking man in their midst, while the smallest ones look quite comfortable and secure in his presence. Thus a hierarchical reception of nonsense dictated by conventional familial roles uneasily resists the egalitarian possibility that nonsense might transform the nest of owls into a family made up entirely of children.

The art of Lear's nonsense is the art of sustaining its ambivalence and indeterminacy; but making the limericks "perfectly clear & bright" also involves providing some form of resolution or at least security for the child audience. Thus Lear's success depends on his ability to balance the eruptive possibilities of the nonsense against a perhaps stronger, more imperative demand for closure. To say that the limericks ultimately satisfy this demand in a purely formal way is not to detract from them, but rather to epitomize much of my argument and bring it, so to speak, full circle. As an illustration let me offer this final limerick:

There was an Old Man, on whose nose,
Most birds of the air could repose;
But they all flew away, at the closing of day,
Which relieved that Old Man and his nose. (58)

Although the old man is said to be relieved by the birds' departure, the illustration shows that he is quite happy in their presence. Yet the
substitution of the old man's tremendous nose for the various nonsense perches, the trees or nests of the other limericks, confers some additional, strenuous responsibility on him. Even though it is the birds, not the man, who perch themselves on the nose, it is the old man who assumes the posture of a tightrope walker. The effort and the performance are ultimately his, and the birds enjoy it contentedly and seemingly without any awareness of the old man's artistry. Yet what relieves him and makes the balancing act possible is the knowledge that it will end and the birds will depart as surely as "the closing of day." Time is the partner of poetic form, and will bring about a kind of closure even where meaning remains open. Lear's artistry establishes an interlude where the children in his audience find themselves metaphorically suspended from the conventional world but still secure in the reassurance of the nonsense world's finitude, its balance of imaginative possibility and formal limits, and the certainty that the game always comes to an end.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise indicated, Lear's limericks are quoted from The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear.

2 See Hark, Edward Lear, 24-29. The critical literature on Lear's limericks is very concisely and usefully surveyed by Colley, 1-31.

3 On the sources of the limericks and Lear's handling of them, see Hark, Edward Lear, 24-29; Byrom, 49-51; and Colley, 25-27.

4 On play in the limericks, see Ede, 58-60; on the marking-off of play space, see Huizinga, 9, 19-20.

5 Lear's most recent biographer states unequivocally that "there is no evidence whatever of homosexuality in [Lear's] life" (Levi 31); Lady Susan Chitty's 1989 biography, in contrast, takes Lear's love for Frank Lushington as the keynote of its interpretation of Lear's life. My argument adheres to the presentation of the problem of Lear's sexuality in Noakes's Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer.

6 See Selected Letters, 236, for the portrait as well, a charming sketch of an expressionless, bird-sized Lear sitting in a nest with his arm around a coquily smiling henbird.

Works Cited


**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420039466&v=2.1&u=k12_litrc&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1420039466