

Biography – Edward Lear (1812-1888)

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Edward Lear was a man of many talents: illustrator, landscape painter, travel writer, and poet. But it is for his talent as a writer of nonsense rhymes—known today as limericks—that he is best remembered by generation after generation of children. Before the works of Lear and Lewis Carroll were published, most literature written for children was full of "commonsense", and was intended to provide moral or didactic instruction. Lear's limericks, on the other hand, could perhaps be said to be the Victorian version of today's cartoon series, where everyday "commonsense" was put to one side, and "nonsense" was allowed to run riot. It is mainly thanks to Edward Lear that the limerick is still so popular, more than a hundred years after his death, not only in English-speaking countries, but in many other countries too.

Edward Lear – artist and writer



Edward Lear lived at the same time as another famous writer, *Lewis Carroll*, best known for *Alice in Wonderland* and other books written for children. Both of these writers lived during the Victorian age. Although most people probably think of the literature written during this period as rather serious and solemn, there were also writers who produced very light-hearted and entertaining works, among them Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. (Illustration from *Alice in Wonderland*)

Edward Lear was born in Highgate, England in 1812. He was the twentieth (!) child of Jeremiah Lear, a London stockbroker, and his wife Ann. Soon after Edward was born, his father lost most of his money, and the family had to adapt to a much lower standard of living. At the age of six, Lear began to suffer from bouts of epilepsy, and a few years later he began to experience periods of acute depression. He continued to suffer from these and other health problems for the rest of his life.

For much of his childhood, Lear was brought up and educated by his elder sister Ann. It was thanks to her that Lear was introduced to both classical and modern literature, especially poetry, and to drawing. Already at the age of 15, he sold his poems and drawings to earn some money.

As a young man, Lear began to earn his living by illustrating scientific books on birds, and later on he became a landscape painter. In fact, he became so well-known that he was asked to give drawing lessons to Queen Victoria herself! All the same, Lear's success as a landscape painter was rather short-lived, and he gradually

became disillusioned by the lack of interest in his work.

Edward Lear's nonsense rhymes—comic relief for earnest Victorians

If you have read our text on Oscar Wilde, you may remember that the quality of earnestness was a trademark of Victorian society. Victorian children were therefore brought up very strictly, and their education did not leave much room for humour or laughter. Can you imagine, therefore, what a joy and relief it must have been for them to read such poems, where the most absurd, not to mention impossible, situations were brought to life—not only in the form of rhymes, but also in the form of Lear's comical drawings?



Queen Victoria

As you will see from the poems we have chosen to publish, many of them begin with the phrase "There was an old man from...". This was Lear's way of poking fun at grown-ups, to make them look absurd—something that must have delighted the children of his day. You will also notice that many of Lear's subjects had long noses or beards, and big eyes.

Nonsense rhymes were not just enjoyed by children, however. Adults also found Lear's books a welcome relief from the restrictive teachings of the Church of England and from Victorian society in general.

The first edition of *A Book of Nonsense* was published in 1846, and was a collection of both old limericks and new ones composed by Lear himself. Two further editions were published in 1855 and 1861. Lear also wrote travel books that he illustrated himself, had books of his paintings published, and exhibited his own work at exhibitions in England. *The Owl and the Pussycat* was the first of his nonsense songs to be published, in 1867.

Nonsense writing

Both Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear are representatives of a special kind of writing that became very popular during the Victorian age and was known as *nonsense literature*. Lear published his first *Book of Nonsense*, a collection of limericks for children, in 1846. Lear actually referred to his own poems as "nonsense, pure and absolute". In fact, Lear himself never used the term "limerick", but called his poems nonsense rhymes. The term "limerick" did not actually become popular until around the time of Lear's death, and exactly how this name came into use is still a mystery to this day.

The limerick (as we call it today), or a form very similar to it, had already existed for several hundred years before Lear produced *A Book of Nonsense*, and some books containing limericks had already been printed before Lear's time. What made his books so popular, however, were the size of the collections and the novel style of Lear's illustrations.

Although he was born in England, Lear actually spent most of his adult life travelling abroad, particularly to the Mediterranean countries. On his travels he drew landscapes and animals, particularly birds. In fact, one of Brazil's rarest birds was named after him! This happened after

Lear, on a trip to Brazil, happened to paint it, not realising that he was painting a species that until then had not been identified!

He eventually bought some land and built a house in San Remo in Italy, where he died in 1888 at the age of 75.

Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

1. The meaning of literature

Why do you think Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll wrote "nonsense literature"? Was it because they needed to cheer themselves up? Or was it a reaction to the society in which they lived? Or was it because they had nothing better to do? Do you think Lear's limericks and poems are funny? Do you think this is important literature? What do people mean by the term "important literature"? And who decides what is important literature and what is not?

2. Exercise: What is *nonsense*?

Suppose a friend of yours has listened carefully to something you have said, and then suddenly exclaims: "This is pure nonsense!" What could your friend possibly mean by this?

- That he/she does not know what you are talking about?
- That he/she does not understand what you just said?
- That no one can understand what you just said?
- That he/she thinks that what you said was boring?

Can you think of more possible meanings? What could your friend say if he/she *liked* what you said? Can you think of any words that mean the opposite of "nonsense"?

3. Other people's approval

Lear gradually lost interest in landscape painting because he felt that his work was not appreciated by others. Can you understand him? Would you work with something that no one, or only a few people, took an interest in? Why, or why not? Do you think there are people who would continue to do something they enjoyed regardless of what other people said?

4. Identifying things and making lists

When Lear was in Brazil, he painted a rare bird that had not been *identified* before. When we identify things (especially in the sciences), we give them names and put the names in lists. Then we arrange the names and the lists into some kind of logical order.

Have you ever made lists of things that you have "identified"? For example: your clothes, your books, your letters, your Christmas presents, trees in the park, pupils at your school, words on a sheet of paper, pictures and posters in your room? If so, how did you arrange the lists? What did you learn from making these lists?

Is it possible to identify everything in the whole world, or are there some things that are impossible to identify?