

What is a limerick?

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Limericks have been told for hundreds of years. Nobody knows who started telling them, or when or where they originated. All we know is that they take their name from the Irish city of Limerick (situated in the county by the same name). On these pages we shall learn more about limericks and also do some exercises.

Two examples

A limerick is a poem with a special rhythm. Read the limericks below and see if you can figure out the pattern:

There was an old dame from Peru,
And she dreamt she was chewing her shoe.
She woke up in the night
in a terrible fright
when she found it was perfectly true.

Said an ape as he swung by his tail,
To his offspring both female and male;
"From your offspring, my dears,
In a couple of years,
May evolve a professor at Yale."

About limericks

Limerick, pronounced "lihm-uhr-ihk", is a form of humorous verse. It takes its name from the city of Limerick in Ireland. No one knows how or where the form originated.

Limericks may cover a wide range of subjects. The first line often begins with: "There was a ..." and ends with the name of a person or place. The last line usually contains an amusing or surprising punch line.

Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1846) made the form popular. The following is a typical limerick by Lear:

There was a young lady of Wilts,
Who walked up to Scotland on stilts;
When they said it is shocking
To show so much stocking,
She answered, "Then what about kilts?"

Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

1. No one knows how, where or when people began to write limericks, but somehow this humorous form of poetry became a tradition that is still very popular today. When you start to think about it more closely, there are many other things that are as unexplainable as the origin of the limerick. For instance: how, where or when did people start using words to communicate with each other? What was the first word to be said in the world? What was the first sentence? When did Norwegians first start to think of themselves as "*Norwegians*" for the very first time? Where does a river start? When did you start to think of yourself as a person with responsibility for yourself?
2. Consider the old dame from Peru who dreamt she was chewing her shoe. She was alarmed to wake up and discover that her dream was in fact true. Has something like this ever happened to you? Have you ever *dreamt* that you were doing something at the same time as you were *in fact doing it in reality*? What kind of actions would you say are possible to dream and do at the same time:
 - chew a shoe?
 - walk around the house?
 - have a conversation with a friend?
 - watch TV?
 - eat a sandwich?
 - cuddle your pet?
 - ride a bike?
 - play a computer game?
3. The second limerick is about an ape that tells his children that, given time, apes may grow into human beings, who in turn may become university professors. Do you think that humans have evolved from apes? If not, where do human beings come from? Is it likely that there is no connection between human beings and the animal world? Would you say that humans are a kind of animal? Is it just as difficult to say when the human race started as it is to say when and where the first limerick was made?