

## Reading the Poem

### Famous Limericks by Edward Lear

#### The Poet

Edward Lear (1812-1888) was born into a very large family, the 20<sup>th</sup> child of a London stockbroker. He was brought up by his older sister Ann.



After elementary schooling, largely at home, he worked as an illustrator. His speciality was birds, and other animals. He was discovered by Edward Stanley, the Earl of Derby, who took Lear into his house to draw the Earl's private menagerie. The Earl had many children, and Lear enjoyed their company. He was a shy, bearded, bespectacled man, a lifelong bachelor, and quite lonely. His funny poems and silly drawings, done for the Earl's children, were eventually collected in ***A Book of Nonsense***, which was published in 1845. It soon attracted a great deal of attention, and Lear became famous.

Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) were the two most famous writers of 'nonsense' verse (in English) of all time. It is more than a coincidence that they should both begin writing and publishing nonsense at almost the same time, though the two did not know one another.

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### Famous Limericks by Edward Lear

#### The Poet

The reasons are not hard to find. Both men were solitary, melancholy bachelors, with a fondness for children. Both lived in a difficult age, one that needed a laugh. The 'Victorian' era was notoriously 'straight-laced', with a tendency to regard pleasure as dangerous, even sinful. Lear once wrote: 'When will it please God to knock Religion on the head & substitute charity, love & common sense?' Even schooling was brutally focused on 'skills', with almost no opening for the imagination or 'play'. If a story appeared, it invariably had a moral to it. Lear was in effect rebelling against such sternness, when he wrote things that had no moral and were utterly without educational benefit. His limericks often mock respectability and manners. For instance, the tendency of Victorian men (Lear himself included) to have magnificent beards is satirized in the beard limerick in this collection. To a little girl, who wasn't sure if such things, and laughing in general, was really respectable, he replied: "My dear child, I'm sure we shall be allowed to laugh in Heaven!"



Lear travelled widely and was very popular. However, his personal life was quite sad. He suffered from epilepsy – which in those days was almost impossible to treat – as well as asthma and frequent bouts of depression. He was short sighted, and in later life, partially blind. In 1871, he left England forever for the warmer climate of the Mediterranean, settling in San Remo (Italy). He remained there until he died.



# Reading the Poem

## Famous Limericks by Edward Lear

### The Poems

Edward Lear did not invent the form known as the limerick. Indeed, the form he used is now considered the 'classic' or traditional limerick, rather than the 'modern' limerick. The difference is in the final rhyme.



In Lear (and most traditional limericks), the last line basically repeats the first.

There was an Old Person of Dutton,  
Whose head was as small as a button;  
So to make it look big he purchased a wig,  
And rapidly rushed about Dutton.

(Lear's limericks were often printed in four lines, not the now more usual five, though the two rhymes on the shorter lines are still there.) The so-called modern limerick does not simply repeat the first line. It rhymes with it, and the best limericks make clever play on the first rhyme, as in:

There once was a man from Nantucket  
Who kept all his cash in a bucket.  
But his daughter, named Nan  
Ran away with a man  
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### Famous Limericks by Edward Lear The Poems



Here the apparent repetition of 'Nantucket' in fact reveals a highly inventive pun-like variant: 'Nan tucket [took it]'. Some of these limericks spawn a series. For example

Pa followed the pair to Pawtucket  
(The man and the girl with the bucket)  
And he said to the man  
    'You're welcome to Nan,'  
But as for the bucket, Pawtucket.

Most however, start with a place name, invent some sort of crazy story, and make it rhyme, as in

There was an old man of Blackheath  
Who sat on his set of false teeth;  
    Said he with a start,  
    'Oh, Lord bless my heart!  
I have bitten myself underneath!'



# Reading the Poem

## Famous Limericks by Edward Lear

### The Poems

The best limericks keep a surprise for the ending, rather like a 'punch line' in a joke. They are in fact literary jokes, told in 30 or so words. Often the writer will distort or invent words, using the first line as the starting point.

A rare old bird is the pelican;  
His bill holds more than his belican.  
He can take in his beak  
Enough food for a week;  
I'm darned if I know how the helican!

This wordplay is acceptable only because of the rhyme, which defines how the invented word is to be pronounced. It is a sort of linguistic 'naughtiness', which just adds to the fun. The pleasure in a good limerick is the silly story, and if possible the surprise ending.

Limericks always follow a strict pattern. The first, second and fifth lines are exactly the same length (usually eight or nine syllables) and all three rhyme. The third and fourth lines are shorter (usually four to six syllables), and they too rhyme. So the overall scheme is **a/a/b/b/a**. This gives a limerick a wonderful tightness, and because the last line rhymes with the first, a sense of completion.

Why are limericks so popular? Because they are extremely difficult to write, and built on two lovely ideas: wordplay and a 'joke' (or nonsensical story). In just five lines, they are a delicious morsel – and an enduring favourite.