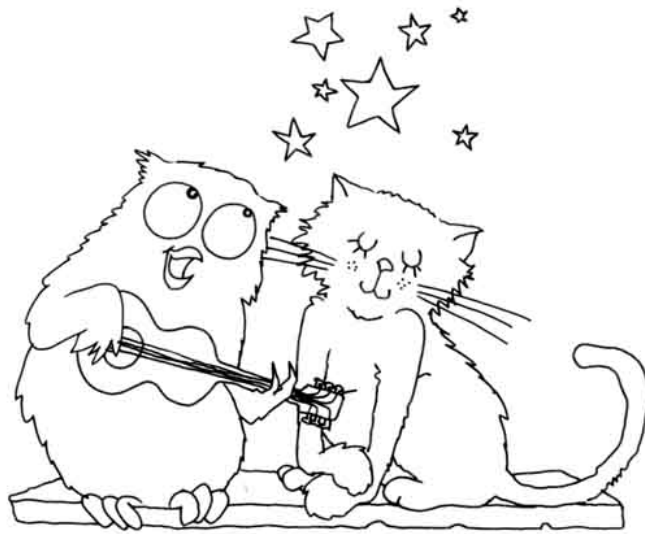


# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### The Owl and the Pussycat

#### 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) are the two most famous writers of 'nonsense' verse (in English) of all time. It is more than a coincidence that they should both have begun writing and publishing nonsense at almost the same time, though the two did not know one another.



# Reading the Poem

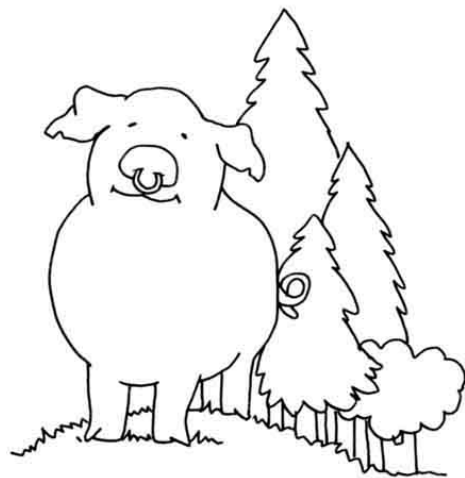
## The Owl and the Pussycat

### 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 and substitute charity, love and 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. To a little girl, who wasn't sure if laughing was really respectable, he once famously said: "My dear child, I'm sure we shall be allowed to laugh in Heaven!"

Although Lear is celebrated for his limericks, 'The Owl and the Pussycat' is his most famous piece of nonsense verse.

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, the year in which 'The Owl and the Pussycat' was published, Lear left England forever for the warmer climate of the Mediterranean, settling in San Remo (Italy). He remained there until he died.



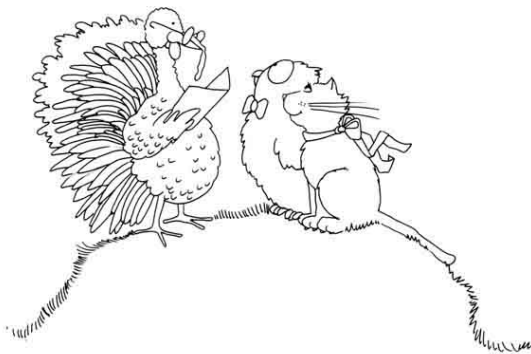
# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### The Owl and the Pussycat

#### The Poem

This famous poem, like Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, was inspired by and written for a real person, a little girl called Janet Symonds, the daughter of Lear's friend, John Addington Symonds. Lear was amusing Janet by composing for her a 'romance', one with animal characters. Because it is a 'child's love story', it is full of fantasy and sweetness.



The little girl would have known enough about adult love stories to expect certain features, however, and the poem supplies them. It has a romantic (and Romantic) setting: stars, moon, sea, beach, an exotic foreign land (the land of the bong-tree), a wood and a guitar, with which the Owl serenades the Pussycat (in those times an acoustic guitar associated with the romantic Mediterranean).

The Owl is the 'man'. The 'Pussycat' is the 'woman'. They go away to an exotic land and purchase a wedding ring from the 'Piggy-wig', after which they are married by a Turkey. There is a joke in the pig's reply to their request: to their question of will he sell the ring to them, he says 'I will' – the most famous line in the wedding ceremony. The rest of the poem has them on their honeymoon; the mention of honey (first stanza) and the moon (the last) are part of the joke. The poem ends happily with them dancing under the moon. Little Janet Symonds would have understood that this love affair was nonsense, but would have loved it anyway.

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### The Owl and the Pussycat

#### The Poem

The poem has an irregular rhyme scheme. The first stanza has the classic limerick pattern (**a/b/c/c/b**), but the others vary widely. The biggest joke of all perhaps is in the second last stanza, which ends with the famous expression 'runcible spoon' (invented by Lear for this poem). That *doesn't* rhyme with anything else in that stanza – apparently breaking the rules completely ... but – and this is what turns it from a seeming error into a triumph – it rhymes with four out of the five lines in the final stanza (the 'moon' rhyme)! It is something even more outrageous and original – an 'anticipatory rhyme'. By the way, everyone asks, what is a 'runcible spoon'? Almost certainly it is a fork with three prongs, one or more with cutting edges, and curved like a spoon.

Why is this poem so popular? Because it is charming, combining an animal fantasy with the traditional elements of the 'romance', and has Lear's trademark cleverness in the rhyming and wordplay. It has often been illustrated, and even turned into cartoons and movies.

