

5. Liebert, pp. 36-37. Liebert does not note that this is very close to a verse in *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen*.
6. *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Johnson (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 39.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17, 31.
9. Liebert, p. 17.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
11. *The Oxford Book of American Light Verse*, ed. William Harmon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 517. A slightly different version may be found in Starbuck's *Desperate Measures* (Boston: Godine, 1978). The poem is copyright © 1978 by George Starbuck, reprinted by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc.

Wim Tigges (essay date 1987)

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[In the following essay, Tigges, in a study of the limerick as a literary genre, examines how Lear used and transformed the form to create a new, more literary style of nonsense verse.]

Concerning the limerick there seem to be two schools of thought. On the one hand there are those who, like Gershon Legman, collector of over four thousand bawdy limericks, mainly celebrate it as by origin and nature an oral, indecent verse form. On the other there are those like Herbert Langford Reed, who collected and composed "clean" or "laundered" limericks, who consider them as essentially ingenious little comic dramas. Among the latter category we may include those who are primarily interested in the limerick as a nonsense poem, related to the nursery rhyme.

I believe there is no a priori reason to opt for either one or the other view to the utter exclusion of the other. Legman is being merely cantankerous if not vindictive when he states that "[t]he limerick is, and was originally, an indecent verse-form. The 'clean' sort of limerick is an obviously [*sic*] palliation, its content insipid, it [*sic*] rhyming artificially ingenious, its whole pervaded with a frustrated nonsense that

vents itself typically in explosive and aggressive violence".¹ Apart from the "clean" limerick contests, especially popular around the turn of the century, he mainly attacks Edward Lear, whose limericks he dismisses as "very tepidly humorous" (p. viii), and Edward Gorey, who is said to have written "gruesomely sadistic clean limericks" (p. xxxix), apparently attributing their "failure" to neurotic disease and perversity (pp. xiii, xl). Since he alleges the same shortcomings about the many authors of the bawdy limericks, discerning in them a backfiring sexual hostility, the point falls entirely flat, and seems mainly to reflect the dubious personal taste of the editor.

Rather than enter into this controversy, however, I will deal with the limerick from the point of view of the open-minded literary critic, who must ask himself whether such a slight thing as the limerick, so often indeed associated with obscene doggerel, can under any conditions be said to have an aesthetic value. I will not go once more into the (still controversial) matter of the (pre-)history of the limerick. For this, the reader is referred to the introduction to Legman's collection.² Rather, I will enlarge a little upon the theme of the limerick as an appropriate medium for conveying nonsensical messages, concentrating on the limerick sequences of Edward Lear and Edward Gorey, and on the aspects which they, albeit often paradoxically, seem to share with sonnets and sonnet sequences.

According to W.S. Baring-Gould, the limerick is a self-contained unit, and therefore most sequences fail (p. 19). However, I believe the limerick is most successful as a self-contained unit *within* a sequence, and in this respect alone the limerick could be called the sonnet of nonsense, although at first sight this may seem a sacrilegious comparison. Like the sonnet, however, the limerick is a formal straight-jacket. It requires a set number of lines (five) and a fixed rhyme-scheme (aabba). Somewhat less fixed is its metre, which can be either anapestic or amphibrachic, but not indeed dactylic (Legman, p. lvii) or paeonic (alas! for W.S. Gilbert and Gelett Burgess). The number of feet per line is fixed (33223). Some adherents to this verse-form have limited the possibilities of the contents as well, requiring a geographical or personal name as the rhyme-word of the first line, inviting more ingenious rhyming as less familiar placenames or surnames are used. I do not agree with Legman, who states that the requirement of a name, as well as of the opening phrase "There (once) was . . ." is a weakness (pp. xxxi, xlv, and esp. lxviii).³ Nor do I think that the (near) repetition of the first line in the

last, as in most of Lear's limericks, is necessarily "namby-pamby" (p. xiii).⁴ The whole point of the "tremendously unimportant changes in the adjective rung in by way of climax" is missed by Legman, due mainly of course to his utter depreciation of nonsense effects in the limerick. A more appreciative discussion of Lear's "nonsenses" is given by Prickett,⁵ who aptly emphasizes Lear's clever exploitation of the brevity and discipline of the limerick (p. 126).

In general, I think one ought to agree, at least as a starting-point, with Baring-Gould's requirements that "the best limericks should satisfy us by their unexpected solutions to rhyming problems, and they should delight us with a surprise ending. If the thought can be anticipated before the climax is reached . . . the limerick is weakened. The real trick is a neat combination of metrical perfection, verbal felicity and a quick turn of wit" (p. 22). Compare Langford Reed's three "essentials" as quoted by Harrowven on p. 63: "(a) a good last line, (b) ingenuity of rhyme, (c) a good plot, creating a ludicrous instance right from the start. And also the verse must have a strong cause as well as a strong effect." These essentials can very well include a "There was . . ." opening, a challenging geographical name to rhyme with, and a repeated or near-repeated first line.

Edward Lear, if not the Father of the Limerick in general, was certainly the first to apply this verse-form for nonsensical purposes—in fact, he never used the word limerick, but called it a "nonsense". Lear is frequently reported to have been inspired if not influenced by the early nursery collections of *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women* (1820) and *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen* (1822).⁶ How he transformed these fairly trivial and innocuous children's rhymes into a more advanced type of nonsense can be seen when comparing a sample from the *Old Women* sequence to one from Lear's first *Book of Nonsense* (1846).

First of all, what happens to the Old Women [of Lynn] is not on the whole very nonsensical—the most untoward event is that described in the first item of the series, in which we are told how a Mrs Towl goes to sea with her owl, which screams for a physic against seasickness. The illustrations, eight of which are given in Harrowven between pages 64 and 65, are in the realistic manner. Lear, who as a professional artist could draw very like to life, turned the illustrations to his limericks into doodles. In the example chosen ["**There Was an Old Man with a Nose**"] it is evident that for the limerick in question

to be nonsensical at all we need the information provided by the drawing. Here both the size of the nose and the dismay of its beholders are turned nonsensical by means of an exaggeration which does not appear from the text. That there is nothing to fear (for the child-reader) is indicated by the frivolous twist in the nose, and by the quite complacent if not proud expression on the face of its owner.

Both the *Old Women* sample and that from Lear are early specimens, and we can trace a development that bifurcates into both the bawdy and the nonsensical tradition. The bawdy variety is easily obtained from the Old Woman of Lynn limerick by replacing the word "chin" by another four-letter word indicating a different part of this lady's physique, thereby incidentally strengthening the irony of the abundance of her Beaux as well as of her being called "charming", and creating a similar tension between text and illustration.⁷ The nonsensical type is already created by Lear, who simply exaggerates the size of the nose in his drawing, and who expands on this type of malformation in the texts of other limericks, as when informing us about a lady whose chin is so sharp that she can play the harp with it.

Prickett (p. 125) as well as Ede (pp. 40-1) and Byrom (pp. 120ff.) have commented on the fact that in Lear's limericks the pictures and the poems belong together, and the example [of "**There Was an Old Man with a Nose**"]. Often the drawings intensify the effect of the text (Ede, p. 40), but as Byrom puts it (p. 123) in most cases "the image calms the word".

In their discussion of Lear's limericks, Prickett and Byrom complement one another well. Prickett shows how in individual verses Lear highlights the unexpected combinations of words rather than concentrating on the punch-line (p. 123). Byrom on the other hand deals with the two collections as sequences (of 112 and 100 items respectively), and shows how a general atmosphere is conveyed by each series, of which the first is said to be more violent and despairing than is often supposed.⁸ With some justification Byrom regards the recurrent Old Men and Young Ladies as representing one character, and the ubiquitous "they" as the representatives, usually hostile but occasionally helpful, of the society to which the protagonists of these limericks are outsiders, eccentrics in a literal sense of the word. Moreover, he detects a pattern in them: "The two series express a search, intense and unconscious, for peace of mind, a struggle against the fears of the heart, a reaching out towards the joys of the spirit" (p. 89).

Ede also prefers to read Lear's limericks as series (p. 32). She emphasizes the isolation and loss of identity as characteristic of these poems. We shall see that this applies even more to the Gorey cycle. This isolation is often expressed in terms of violent behaviour. Ede comes close to identifying the limerick as the very essence of nonsense when she says:

In a very real sense, Lear's limericks barter right to *assert* their significance (but not their significance itself) in exchange for the freedom to avoid *overtly* making the choice between art as self-expression and art as social communication. They thus appeal both to man's desire to manipulate formal elements, here language, to create a complex, satisfying order out of disorder, and to his urge to defy normal relations, to refuse to make sense. The limericks achieve this by carefully balancing a series of related structural and thematic tensions

(p. 26).

In the same place she rightly stresses the "function" of these nonsense poems in allowing the reader to simultaneously "experience" and distance himself from the emotions and actions presented. In this respect, the limerick's literary function comes very close indeed to that of the sonnet: the latter form "signals" love, whereas the former signals its opposite, isolation. This may explain why the "popular" form of the limerick deals with obscenities and (sexual) taboos, for these express the completest human isolation in terms of actions and emotions supposedly related to eroticism and to emotional and physical togetherness and belonging.

This thematic comparison between the limerick and the sonnet can be expanded by considering the descriptive diction of both verse forms. Whereas the sonneteer underlines the love theme by means of frequent descriptions of the physical beauty of the beloved, which is expressed in traditional courtly or Platonic terms, the writer of the limerick, both of the bawdy and the nonsensical variety, emphasizes the physical deformity of his protagonists. Sonnet and limerick can thus be shown to be paradoxically alike, in that both evoke in their readers an expectation of a particular type of stereotyped diction, if of an opposite nature.

The same applies to the word-play, where the similarity is even closer. Sonnets, being written in a "high" or formal poetical style, tend to be highly metaphorical, if only because the beloved has to be constantly "compared". The paradoxes that seem to be inherent to human love in its erotic as well as its

spiritual aspects are caught and presented *par excellence* in that device equally popular in the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare, to mention only the most famous examples, namely the oxymoron. In the limerick the metaphor is rarely, if ever, used. A "big-wig" is literally that: a man whose wig is so large that it covers his whole person. Paradoxes here are merely verbal, in the form of puns, nonsense words or other *non sequiturs*.

Quite contrary to what Legman assumes in his suggestion that the "erotic" limerick at least is "healthy", as the neurotic ones by Lear and Gorey are not, Ede concludes that the limerick is individualistic and anti-social under the mask of playing with words.

Word-play in the form of punning and suchlike is much more common in the popular limerick than in either Lear or Gorey. There one rarely finds the kind of punning that appears in a limerick like the following:

The young things who frequent picture-palaces
Have no use for this psycho-analysis.
And although Doctor Freud
Is distinctly annoyed
They cling to their old-fashioned fallacies.

(Legman I, nr. 1317)

The nonsense here is merely verbal: the clever rhymes on "palaces" and "Freud", and particularly the "fallacies—phalluses" pun. Play on one word with two different meanings appears in:

To barbarity man said adieu
As brilliant inventions accrue.
To create wheel and lever
Was remarkably clever,
But divinely inspired was the screw.

(Legman II, nr. 2236)

These samples are some of the least insipid ones in the dreary Legman compilations, which by my computation do not contain more than twenty-five limericks (out of 4489!) that should manage to raise a smile of appreciation on the face of a literary-minded reader. The best one is the following, containing another pun:

A ballistical student named Rafferty
Went down to the gentlemen's lavat'ry.
When the walls met his sight
He said, "Newton was right—
This must be the center of graffiti".

(Legman II, nr. 2727).

What makes this limerick aesthetically satisfying is that the pun is not gratuitous, but part of a meaningful phrase (read either way), which offers additional

sense when we realize—only now, as it were—that to reach the centre of graffiti if not of gravity (i.e. the centre of the earth) one would indeed have to “go down”. There is, furthermore, some irony in the word “gentlemen” in combination with the protagonist’s being a student (neither the writers of graffiti nor the student being presumably considered “gentlemen”)—appropriate, it seems at first, for one who also makes a mock-learned remark (the reference to Newton). His “ballistic” interest may well have been limited to the track of his excretions. Then, the walls, which as in personification meet his sight, are indeed not only the “center” of graffiti but also the centre of the very poem—and the centre of gravity only insofar as the topics of the graffiti refer to “grave matters” (including, one presumes, the topics of sex as well as the “death to . . .” or “down with . . .” variety). In his note (p. 668 of *More Limericks*), Legman facetiously appends a reference to the Writing on the Wall at Belshazzar’s Feast.

As we have seen, in Lear’s [**“There Was an Old Man with a Nose”**] limerick, it is the tension between verse and illustration that creates the nonsense: the illustration here is grotesque, the text is “sensible”: why should one not comment on the length of another person’s nose, or rather, why should any one *suppose* that others will be so impolite as to do so? After all, they have not *said* anything yet. In the text, the “supposing” is on the part of the Old Man. But in the drawing there is no “supposing” either: “they” are clearly utterly dismayed—there is no question of “their” merely *supposing* the Old Man’s nose is too long; “they” quite clearly consider it a shocking thing. This is how Lear creates the emotional tension that is characteristic of Nonsense.”

Ede has also explicitly noted the tension between form and content (p. 27), with rhyme, rhythm and metre trivializing or “desensitizing” the serious subject matter. Obviously, this is quite the opposite form of tension from the one that occurs in “serious” poetry, say a sonnet, where rhyme, rhythm and metre serve to heighten and sacralize the subject matter, and where every image and metaphor used has the effect of enforcing the serious sense. In ordinary poems, the technicalities are the non-sensical elements, but they are accepted as the ritual and ceremony, the pomp and circumstance, so to speak, of verbal art. In nonsense poetry it is the other way about. This sense of the nonsensical is often created by overemphasizing instead of underplaying the striking quality of the rhyme¹⁰—nothing serious or “grave” can rhyme to “Rafferty”. But unlike many recent popular limericks

Lear seldom merely plays about with teasing rhymes, not even in the second series of 1872, when he had presumably become more adept at composing limericks. Rhymes such as “Putney-chutney” (Jackson, p. 161), “Bantry-pantry” (p. 172), “Shoreham-decorum” (p. 184) and “Sestri-vestry” (p. 192) are quite restrained; the most frivolous rhyming pairs in this series are “Winchelsea-pin shall see” (p. 173), “Janina-fanning her” (p. 186), “Corsica-saucy cur” (p. 191), “Thermopylae-properly” (p. 199) and “Pisa-please her” (p. 205).

Lear’s forte is the slightly displaced word or phrase, as in

There was an Old Person of Chili,
Whose conduct was painful and silly,
He sate on the stairs, eating apples and pears,
That imprudent Old Person of Chili

(Jackson, p. 6).

Why is this Person’s conduct “painful” (unless he perhaps overate; the archaic past tense “sate” may be a pun on the verb “to sate”)? What precisely is “silly”: sitting on the stairs, eating apples and pears, or the combination of both? And why is he “imprudent”? No answers are provided, and this simple poem is perhaps more nonsensical than the celebrated (one presumes because of the presence of a punch-line):

There was an Old Man who supposed
That the street door was partially closed;
But some very large rats, ate his coats and his hats,
While that futile old gentleman dozed

(Jackson, p. 16),

thus leaving the gentleman “partially clothed”. The words “partially” and “futile” here are utterly inconsequential, and anyhow rats do not usually enter by the street door. We can, of course, explain away the non-sequitur of the word “futile” by assuming that Lear meant to pun on the “few tiles” (slang for top hats) the gentleman will have left after the rats have eaten them.

What Lear added to the limerick of the “Old Women” type was first of all situational nonsense. His Old Men and Young Ladies (Old Women and Young Men do not feature in Lear’s limericks) are mostly eccentrics. Therefore they do not merely misbehave to some realistic extent, like the hoydenish Old Woman of Croydon who puts out her hip; in her case we feel the authorial comment “Alas poor Old Woman of Croydon” is as ironical as the “charm” of the Old Woman of Lynn. Her hoydenish behaviour

should be condemned, like that of the niggardly Woman of Exeter, who locks up her meat when visitors come.¹¹ Lear retains the authorial comment in the form of a repetitive last line with a judgement in the modifying adjectives, but these are often *mal à propos*, as the examples quoted easily testify. Although the poet remains in charge as a judge, the “moral” itself has become inconsequential: some times the judgement is favourable (the “remarkable” Man with a Nose), sometimes it is the reverse (the “imprudent” Person of Chili, the “futile” old gentleman). Lear is as omniscient and as inscrutable as any Creator should be.

Lear's limericks very frequently contain an altercation (physical, verbal or both) between his protagonists and “them”. In the sixty limericks that form the sequence of Edward Gorey's *The Listing Attic*, the distance between protagonist and “them” is greater, the nonsense having become more grotesque and blacker.¹² As in the case of Lear, texts and illustrations are a unity.

Some of [Gorey's limericks], like that about the Young Lady of Usk and the young man named Fred are mildly Learish, although Lear never actually names his characters. Many of the items show a Learish predilection for physical deformities, although the unperceived “horrible bloated” condition of this young man is more mysterious and therefore more terrifying than the openly exhibited malformations in many of Lear's drawings. The exuberance that Lear's characters usually exhibit has gone in Gorey's drawings. The dancing and skipping postures in Lear have been replaced by languid passivity or open defiance, boredom or disgust. Sometimes the protagonist has disappeared altogether. Incidentally, in ten out of the sixty items children occur as characters, a feature unknown to Lear's verses. Violence, usually resulting in death, occurs in no fewer than twenty-four instances.

In fact, eccentric social behaviour in Gorey's limericks is not so much defiant as an expression of boredom or passivity. The young man in the thick coat may be more of an individual than the identical pair of passers-by, but one wonders how triumphantly unique his bloatedness is. On the other hand, the hostility of “them” has changed into indifference, occasionally tempered by mild surprise: after all, how concerned can one get when a baptismal font is abysmally deep? The appearance of a young man with a “full growth of beard” to his friends in the last item but one of the whole series causes much more disturbance.

In the very last limerick, like four others written in (mock-) French, Gorey dedicates his booklet to “Chagrín”; its motto is “O rage! O désespoir!”. There is much more (unfavourable) emotion about here than in Lear's limericks, and Gorey's verses are certainly not kids' stuff.

By using the more popular fifth-line climax, Gorey has created a distance between himself and the little scenes he presents that makes the actions all the more puzzling. The authorial comment in the form of a modifying adjective is often already found in the opening line, as in

A headstrong young woman in Ealing
Threw her two weeks' old child at the ceiling;
When quizzed why she did,
She replied, “To be rid
Of a strange, overpowering feeling.”

Our immediate knowledge about her headstrongness really makes any “quizzing” (a word with a decidedly Victorian flavour) superfluous, because we now are led to expect neither a compliant answer nor a sense of remorse. In the drawing we see a book entitled *Life's Trivial Round* next to some (lethal?) medicine on the bedside table. Is the lady afraid of being overpowered by the feeling of motherhood, to which she is certainly a stranger? We cannot, incidentally, see whether the baby will actually hit the ceiling—in fact it may as well be on its way up as down.

[Another] limerick reflects the mystery of life even better. In the opening line, an ambiguity is created by the fact that both the guest and the household may serve as the referent of the phrase “quite charmless”. It is the illustration that informs us that the guest is female. The lady, who is by no means more charmless than the mother of the thrown child, is warned of what may befall her in a household to which she is, like many a Gorey character, a guest, by definition a person of uncertain identity. She is comforted as well: since the household eccentric is eyeless and armless (i.e. possibly harmless, but not unharmed), he will not be able to either observe her (lack of) charms or grab her, under the (mistaken) impression that she may be charming. The paradox created here is that of the conflicting female fears of being attacked by a stranger and having to meet, at the head of the stairs (a danger of gliding or falling may be implied here) a heavily mutilated eccentric, who stares at one out of empty sockets—not to mention the initial fear of being charmless. Perhaps the lady ought to be really more afraid of the other inmates of the household, however charmless it may otherwise be, who keep such an eccentric.

The drawing shows the heavy grey tints that are so common in Gorey, but which are contrasted with [other] slight black-and-white drawings that appear. As is also often the case in Gorey, women, if not presented as *femmes fatales* or worldly young ladies, are helpless victims, as in the instance of the lady who observes her fading charms in the cheval-glass, also known as a *psyché*, and in which indeed not only her "sex" but her whole person except the head have disappeared. The paradox is here that from our position we cannot actually see what the vexed lady observes, only her dismay. This lady is entirely isolated, since even the reader cannot check the truth of her remarks, as was the case in Lear's picture of the deformed nose.

Unlike Lear's illustrations, then, Gorey's offer little or no hope or redeeming aspects, such as an enjoyment of one's eccentricity or uniqueness. In fact, not the protagonists, but "they" are eccentric in showing an utter lack of concern at an untoward event. In Byrom's formulation, Gorey's illustrations do not "calm the word", but neither do they usually intensify the effect of the text, which Ede notices as a characteristic of Lear's drawings. Yet Gorey's pictures are more than mere illustrations. It is in particular the despondent if not desperate mood they create which makes them effective.

Verbally, most of Gorey's limericks are more literary than Lear's. Where the latter often uses vague, and moreover slightly inconsequential adjectives, Gorey's are matter-of-fact and precise, which makes the text less playful and more terrifying. A good example of this is the following:

They had come in the fugue to the stretto
When a dark, bearded man from a ghetto
Slipped forward and grabbed
Her tresses and stabbed
Her to death with a rusty stiletto.

Without any further interpretation, the text reads like the account of a crime in a police report; the precise moment is indicated (at that particular stage of the performance), the murderer is described including the odious reference to his race, his act is recapitulated in three verbs indicating quick and violent motion ("slipped", "grabbed", "stabbed"), and the *corpus delicti* specified (a stiletto, which was seen to be rusty). As usual, the victim is left in the background (twice "her", and a reference to where the man took hold of her). In the accompanying illustration, the musicians continue to play, and some members of the audience regard the event with the annoyed looks of those who find themselves disturbed by a loud cough at a concert.

The nonsense, then, is primarily in the discrepancy between the event, so meticulously described, and the lack of emotional concern shown by the poet as well as by "them". The stabbing is not presented as a point or climax. Moreover, one is tempted to wonder whether the associations that the musical terms evoke ("fugue" and "stretto" literally meaning "flight", "squeezed") are in any way significant. Is the humour merely verbal after all, and the limerick just an occasion for the odd collocation of the words "stretto", "ghetto" and "stiletto"? Or are we to take the stiletto as offering the "point" to the counterpoint that is characteristic of a fugue? If, on the other hand, we take the text as the description of a true event, what disturbs us is not only the incompatibility of a musical performance and a murder (although some musical pieces have a "dying fall"), but also the complete absence of either a motive for the deed or an account of the outcome. It is only when, like a sonnet, we read this poem as one of a series, coming between the equally puzzling accounts of the baby that is thrown at a ceiling and the bloated young man in his thick coat, that we see that there is no method in this madness. Or, as the bearded young man's friends remark: "Although/ We can't say why it's so,/ The effect is uncommonly weird."

The effect of a sequence upon the reader is not only that of offering a particular feeling or event from various angles; it also suggests the presence of infinity, which has been shown to be one of the formative characteristics of the nonsensical mode.¹³ In a sequence, then, both the sonnet and the limerick lose their individual limitedness. As one poet wishes to tell his beloved over and over again that his love is infinite and eternal, so the other presses upon us the infinity and eternity of the incomprehensibility of existence, of the struggle between individual and society, or simply of the sordidness of the "bottom" part of life.

The strict formal requirements of both verse forms, i.e. the required line numbers, rhyme scheme and metre, perhaps illustrate in a paradoxical way the desire for as well as the limits of freedom in restraint, which after all is characteristic of love as well as its opposites: hate, war, entropy, even isolation. Entering the comparison from the nonsense side, so to speak, could one not say that the formal requirements are the rules of the game, enabling the poet of both sonnet and limerick to show his ability to play the game of saying what one has to say in exactly the right amount of lines, with the correct rhyme scheme and metre, but without ever repeating oneself, as in a series of chess games?

If in the above-mentioned respects the sonnet and the limerick seem to be quite alike, in other important aspects they appear to be one another's counterparts. The main themes have already been mentioned: love, especially in its spiritual as well as its grandly erotic nature, its courtliness, as against the sense of struggle and isolation; "I love you" as against "they hate him or her"—the very distance the nonsense poet creates between himself and his protagonist, presenting this person in a variety of excentric guises from all parts of geography, may in itself be a significant distinction. In any case, whereas the sonnet is the prototype of lyrical poetry, the limerick is by nature a narrative and descriptive form.

Obviously, in many respects the sonnet and the limerick are on opposite ends of the scale—but not necessarily that of "decorum". The basic similarity is that the sonnet-form and the limerick-form perform the same function for their respective subject-matter: to set up the expectation of the theme, but also that of the contents transcending the form. Of course countless numbers of execrable limericks have been fabricated, but I suppose as much can be said for the sonnet. I hope my reading of some samples will have demonstrated that the best limericks are worthy of as careful consideration by the literary critics as the best sonnets.

Notes

1. G. Legman, ed., *The Limerick*, (1954) New York, 1969, p. vii.
2. See also e.g. H. Langford Reed, *The Complete Limerick Book*, New York & London, 1925; W.S. Baring-Gould, *The Lure of the Limerick. An Uninhibited History*, London, 1968, Part One: "The Lore of the Limerick", and the derivative and erratic J. Harrowven, *The Limerick Makers*, London, 1976. A really "authentic" history of the limerick does not, as far as I am aware, exist.
3. On p. xlv Legman calls the geographical rhyming a "trick" and a "purely formal and intellectual ornamentation", and on p. lxxviii he calls "There was . . ." an inactive opening. Of course it is not at all a "falsely stressed Iambic opening", in view of the fact that many limericks are perfectly amphibrachic.
4. A good example of effective repetition of a first line at the end is the following, quoted in Harrowven, p. 74:

There was a young man of Herne Bay
Who was making some fireworks one day,

But he dropped his cigar
In a gun powder jar,
There WAS a young man of Herne Bay.

5. S. Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, Hassocks (Sussex), 1979, pp. 120-6. See also T. Byrom, *Nonsense and Wonder. The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear*, New York, 1977, pp. 49-150, and L.S. Ede, "The Nonsense Literature of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll", PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1975, pp. 21-49. Also E. Cammaerts, *The Poetry of Nonsense* (1925), London, 1971, pp. 5-8.
6. See e.g. Harrowven, who quotes them in full, pp. 27ff.
7. For "quin" as a variant of "quim" see e.g. E. Partridge, *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*, Penguin, 1972. Indeed, a "folk" or oral variant containing this word may be surmised.
8. See Holbrook Jackson, ed., *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, London, 1947, pp. 3-58 and 159-208.
9. See my article "An Anatomy of Nonsense" pp. 23-46 of this volume.
10. Cf. Cammaerts, pp. 40-1, where it is stated that "[o]ne of the tests of good poetry . . . is that the rhyme should be suggestive and original, while remaining the perfect servant of thought", and that "the poet's words must obey his inspiration, without being subservient to it". In the nursery rhyme, on the other hand, which Cammaerts elsewhere (pp. 2-3) associates with the limerick, "[t]he rhyme, not the thought, becomes the source of inspiration, and the singer builds his story around it".
11. See Harrowven, pp. 27, 28. *The Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen* occasionally turn the last line into a punch-line.
12. First published in 1954, and re-issued in *Amphigorey. Fifteen Books by Edward Gorey*, New York, 1975. No page numbers are given.
13. See, e.g., S. Stewart, *Nonsense. Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Baltimore and London, 1979, esp. pp. 116-45.

Kirby Olson (essay date 1993)

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[In the following essay, originally published in 1993, Olson charts Lear's use of the comic picturesque, his influ-