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## Sensing The Nonsense: Edward Lear and His Nonsense Poetry

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### Abstract:

*Edward Lear, a popular poet of nonsense verse and limericks, wrote during the Victorian period which was marked by general uncertainties in life and society. Interestingly, Lear's nonsense poetry seems to be untouched by the social debates and problems of the day. It is also fascinating to note that these charming nonsense verses were penned down by a man who was always afflicted with pains – physical and emotional. This paper attempts to examine whether these nonsense poems are meant only for pure amusement or they are somehow related to the life of the poet and the then society. In Lear's nonsense poems, the two extremes of logic and absurdity are finely united. In fact, there are subtle links between Lear's nonsense works and the general Victorian phenomena. Nonsense can be viewed in this context as a sort of escape genre. Moreover, Lear's nonsense poetry is also subtly connected to his own life and character. There underlies somehow the latent sadness and suffering in many of his poems, though apparently, they are funny and entertaining. Lear's creation of unreal beings and absurd situations may be linked, in some way, to his own unhappiness and sense of isolation too. These poems become, above all, an expression of his inmost longings, frustrations, and wish-fulfilment dreams. The paper seeks to reread these aspects through select textual references.*

**Key Words:** Nonsense, logic, absurdity, meanings, wish-fulfilment.

## Introduction:

The well-known painter, illustrator, and poet of limericks and nonsense verse, Edward Lear (1812–1888), holds a special place in the annals of 19th-century literature. During the Victorian era, when economic and technological advancements were occurring at a rapid pace and social mobility and instability were the result, Lear produced his nonsense poetry. Liberalization, utilitarianism, free trade, and the accompanying ethical discussion were other notable features of the era. Naturally, Victorian culture and daily life were riddled with general uncertainty. However, it appears that Lear's absurd poems are unaffected by these societal issues and disagreements. “Indeed, one of the most striking things about Lear’s nonsense in the context of Victorian children’s literature is that it is joyously free of moral consequence” (Lodge, 77). Even more intriguing is the fact that the author of these endearing nonsensical verses – which appeal to both adults and children – was never totally free from emotional and physical suffering. In fact, initially we stumble to link the poems to their creator’s life and personality. Now, the question arises as to whether these nonsense poems are ‘nonsense absolute’ – nonsense/meaningless for their own sake and meant only for pure amusement or they are somehow related to the life of the poet and the then society and culture. This may lead us to another serious question – whether a text can be meaningless at all or there is some sort of sense behind these nonsense poems.

## Discussion:

The word ‘nonsense’ is really difficult to define. It is popularly taken to be behaviour, words, ideas or statements that have no meaning or make no sense. It goes without saying that nonsense genre is very popular among the children. It is, according to Vivien Noakes, the “incongruity of characters, situations or words, plus a predictable stable element such as numbers, choruses, alliteration, or paradoxically the correct use of words which equals nonsense” (Noakes, 223). In fact, in a Lear text two extremes of sense and nonsense are united in a very unique way. On deeper level, we find precise links between Lear’s nonsense works and the then socio-cultural atmosphere of the Victorian age. In fact, one of the main causes of the popularity of the nonsense genre in that period was due to the vagueness of Victorian culture and the “plight of the individual faced with either a nameless mass society or an indifferent nature before which he is distinctly alone and ‘other’” (Hark, 113). Nonsense serves the purpose of an escape genre which helps to evade ambiguous questions and to get away from ambiguous questions. Evidently, nonsense is really difficult to pin down. Though Lear’s literary nonsense is apparently meant for pure amusement, it is said to reflect the “deep-seated Victorian Angst about the capacity for irrationality and violence in the individual, his society and his universe” (Hark, 121). However, Lear denied any such

connection and claimed his poetry to be “nonsense, pure and absolute” which was meant for the mere pleasure of “administering innocent mirth of thousands” (Wells, XXVI). T. S. Eliot is also reported to have noted in an unpublished lecture given in 1933 at Scripps College, Claremont, that “Lear does not mean to mean anything” (Baker, 566).

Considering the various facets of Lear’s limericks and nonsense poetry, we can discover their subtle links with their creators’ life and personality. Vivien Noakes has aptly subtitled her biography of Edward Lear *The Life of a Wanderer*. On a literal level, the phrase refers to Lear’s constant and wide traveling from 1837 until he finally settled at his ‘Villa Tennyson’ on the San Remo coast of Italy in the 1870s. But ‘wandering’ suggests rootlessness, loneliness, and uncertainty too. It is also a metaphor for Lear’s emotional life, which hints at the sense of melancholy that we often come across in Lear’s nonsense poetry, just if we look beneath the absurd surface of his nonsense verse.

From the biographical point of view, Lear’s nonsense poetry is obliquely connected to the poet’s life and personality, e. g. epilepsy, bachelorhood, fear of ostracism, sense of self-alienation, sense of shame about a latent homosexuality etc. It may also be true that Lear used nonsense as a kind of safety valve to escape from the annoyances and disturbances of life. This escapism serves as a nice refuge from the din and bustle of everyday life.

Behind the apparent meaninglessness of Lear’s nonsense verse there lie the biographical and personal matters which one should not forget about. From his very birth Lear’s life was engulfed with trials and tribulations. He was Ann and Jeremiah Lear’s twentieth child – and the youngest to live—out of their twenty-one children. Lear was raised by his elder sister Ann, who was 21 years older than him. Ann lavished affection on him and nurtured him until her passing, when Lear was nearly 50 years old. His health was never good. He experienced breathing issues, frequent epileptic convulsions, and partial blindness starting at the age of six. Lear’s epilepsy was a source of shame for him, which contributed to his emotional solitude, sadness, and guilt. The closest he got to marriage were two rejected proposals to the same, much younger woman. Lear was destined for a lonely existence despite having numerous long-distance friendships. His manservant Giogio Kokali (1856–1883) and his cat Foss (1871–1887) were his only permanent friends. Lear’s intimate friendship with Franklin Lushington, for whom he is claimed to have formed a homosexual attraction, troubled him a lot. Consequently, Lear’s topsy turvy life might have led him create something that can provide him some sort of escape and comfort.

It is therefore very natural that under the apparent fun and amusement one can find sadness, suffering and loss. In his limericks and nonsense poems, Lear created many unreal beings and settings, absurd situations and funny characters. It is also true that at the bottom of many his poems we find some sort of loss and the tone is melancholy. The Pobble loses his toes; the Pelicans lose their daughter. Poems like *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* and *The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo* contain the touching theme of the loss of love. Lear's invented creatures such as the octopod Discobollos, the Pobble, the Dong, the Bo, the Jumblies, and the Quangle Wangle are the brilliant products of his imagination. Lear often sets these poems in his nonsense landscapes on the Hills of the Chankly Bore or the Great Gromboolian Plain. How are these unreal and imaginary creatures linked to his life? It may be that only by creating unreal beings and settings that Lear could write with unrepressed emotion about his own unhappiness and sense of isolation. His nonsense world, full of all these non-words, non-creatures and bizarre settings, gave his imagination full play which in reality is thwarted by his life. That is why Sara Lodge draws a parallel between Lear's creations and observations: "His poems and pictures explore the possibilities of composite identity and interspecies pairings, drawing the science he observed into the world he invented" (Lodge, *Inventing Edward Lear*, 3).

As far as the longer poems are concerned, in some of them the characters are nonhuman, and the main action frequently involves a pair taking off a voyage. The Owl and the Pussycat set out on a sea journey in a beautiful pea-green boat; the Jumblies depart in a sieve; the Duck and Kangaroo hop around the world; a table and a chair go out to take the air. These poems, though nonsensical, seem clearly to constitute Lear's reflections on his own life as a bachelor and wanderer. These groups also indicate a joyful togetherness that Lear never attained in his life. The components of this Larian epiphany – song, dance, food, the shore in the moonlight – are described in *The Owl and the Pussycat* and recur frequently in later poems:

They dined on mince, and slices of quince  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;  
And hand in hand, on the edge of sand,  
They danced by the light of the moon,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon. (Lear, 180)

These so-called nonsense poems can be read, above all, as an expression of the inmost longings, frustrations, and wish-fulfilment dreams of a lovable and intensely loving man. In fact, despite the

fond affection of numerous relatives, friends and readers – children and adults – he was never loved in the intimate, exclusive, constant manner he so fervently desired.

Lear's nonsense poems show that 'nonsense' cannot be casually attached to poems which just relate absurd stories and make no sense but raise a smile. There is, in fact, a fine balance between presence and absence of meaning which is sustained through various devices like creative play of words, playing with sounds etc. Playing with language structure is the child's way of learning how language works. And Lear's fascination for the sounds and phonetic components of words is immense. In other words, his verbal innovations and creations of word-like non-words play a vital role in giving the poems a kind of 'fuzzy' image, or feeling of sense.

Lear's nonsense texts abound in non-words like – 'purpledicular', 'spongetaneous', 'higgledy piggledy hen' etc. Such words and phrases are nonsensical and based on repetition of sounds. On closer look, one may find in them some associations – the non-word 'purpledicular' may have the associations of 'purple' and 'perpendicular'; 'spongetaneous' probably gives rise to associations like 'sponge' and 'spontaneous'; in 'higgledy piggledy hen', the sound 'iggle' is repeated in two multisyllabic non-words which through its onomatopoeic association recalls the crackling of the hen. Thus, through repetition of alliterative and onomatopoeic combinations the reader/listener is left with an imprecise but definite feeling of sense. This kind of repetition and word-play also help in child language acquisition which explains the popularity of these nonsense poems. An extreme example of sound repetition occurs in the poem *Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow*. One of the refrains for instance reads:

Chippy-wippy sikky tee  
 Bikky-wikky tikky mee  
 Spikky-chippy wee. (Lear, 141)

The lines are built on the several repetition of the minimal pair sounds /I/ and /i:/. Therefore, where we have very little information, meaning is safeguarded by this phonological element, the repetition of discrete phonological units, thereby the necessary text cohesion and consequent text-reader compatibility is assured. "By turning sounds into senses (and senses into sounds), Lear's special brand of lyrical nonsense reaches back to the roots of language acquisition" (Jagger, 50).

As for Lear's limericks, they have nearly always the standard beginning: 'There was a Young/Old Man/Lady/Person of ...' followed by a place-name and occasionally a relative clause, a

past tense sentence relating an action and a repetition (refrain-like) of the elements of the first or second line:

There was a Young Lady of Turkey,  
 Who wept when the weather was murky;  
 When the day turned out fine,  
 She ceased to repine,  
 That capricious Young Lady of Turkey. (Lear, 27)

This type of character is a perfect example of funny and eccentric character which is so frequent in a nonsense poem. They are bizarre, whimsical, far-fetched and funny. Certainly, they lack in sense, but they communicate a feeling of imprecise sense expressed through repetition and play of language.

From the less subjective angle, the limerick protagonists provided for the didactically surfeited Victorian child examples of bizarre, misbehaving adults, with no overt moralizing attached. It is also interesting to note that the limericks' inherent morality is mostly expressed in terms of eating customs. In Lear's nonsense poetry, food is often a central symbol. Food also occupies different connotations in Lear. Sharing food symbolizes love and affection, while gluttony is acutely penalised:

There was an Old Man of the South,  
 Who had an immoderate mouth;  
 But in swallowing a dish,  
 That was quite full of fish,  
 He was choked, that Old Man of the South. (Lear, 65)

### Conclusion:

The nonsense poems and limericks of Lear, it becomes quite clear, can be enjoyed both by children and adults alike. According to Emerson, “The plays of children are nonsense, but very educative nonsense” (Emerson, 477). As they are full of funny and eccentric characters, absurd situations and settings, combination of words and non-words and repetition of sounds, children find food for their innocent imagination. What is more, children enjoy nonsense because its language matches children’s. At the same time, there is rich food for adults also. The imprecise meaning and feeling of sense, as we have seen, are hidden in many ways within these nonsense poems; and it is no less enjoyable to discover those. Adults may also be simply attracted to the magical force of child-like word-play, suppressed by the linguistic conventionality of the adult world. And editions of Lear’s nonsense works have appeared in many languages worldwide including French, German,

Italian, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi and Bengali. This shows the extreme popularity of Edward Lear not only among his national Victorian contemporaries but at abroad and even today.

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