

## ENGLISH LIMERICKS AS UNIQUE TYPE OF POETRY

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**Abstract:** A limerick is five lines long with the rhyme scheme a-a-b-b-a. This means that lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme with each other, and lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other. They also have a bouncing rhythm. Limericks are meant to be funny, and often employ elements of literature such as hyperbole, onomatopoeia and alliteration. The first line usually sets up the idea of the poem, and the last is generally the punch line. Although sometimes bawdy, outlandish limericks bring humor and rhyme to the world of poetry.

**Key words:** Rhyme, limericks, meter, poetry, hyperbole, onomatopoeia and alliteration

A limerick is a form of verse, usually humorous and frequently rude, in five-line, predominantly anapestic meter with a strict rhyme scheme of AABBA, in which the first, second and fifth line rhyme, while the third and fourth lines are shorter and share a different rhyme.

The form appeared in England in the early years of the 18th century. It was popularized by Edward Lear (*The Book of Nonsense*, 1845) in the 19th century, although he did not use the term. Gershon Legman (cited: *Anna of the Five Town* by Arnold Bennett, 1902) who compiled the largest and most scholarly anthology, held that the true limerick as a folk form is always obscene, and cites similar opinions by Arnold Bennett and Shaw (*Anna of the Five Town*, 1902), describing the clean limerick as a "periodic fad and object of magazine contests, rarely rising above mediocrity". From a folkloric point of view, the form is essentially transgressive; violation of taboo is part of its function.

The end of the 19th century, when feudalism became stronger, was the period of strengthening of exploitation among the people living in England and other parts of the world. At that time the poor were exploited in hard work but they believed that the situation would end up with happiness. Limericks were the best way to express the people's feelings and make life easier. The word "limerick" has its reference to the country or city in Ireland named Limerick.

The limerick as a form of poetry appears in 1880 in a *New Burnswick Newspaper* (Saint John, 1880). In Los Angeles, U.S.A. "Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book" by Mary Cooper (1744) was the first collection of English Nursery Rhymes, a facsimile edition with a history and annotations by Andrea Immel (*The Cambridge Companion to Children's literature*-2010) and Brian Alderson, (*Ladybird story*, 2014) where the following poem in limerick form appears and is the first example in print of an illustrated limerick. It remains to be well-known today, in various forms :

Hickere, Dickere Dock,  
A Mouse ran up the Clock,  
The Clock Struck One,  
The Mouse fell down,  
And Hickere Dickere Dock.

Usually, limericks were written for criticizing upper level members of society and laughing at them. Here, the meaning of the poem is that during the years of 1649 to 1658, Britain was ruled by Oliver Cromwell as the Lord Protector of the republic. Before he died, he encouraged Parliament to

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appoint his son, Richard to the post. Richard was not suited for being Lord Protector. In contrast to his father Oliver's nature, Richard was mouse-like and timid. He earned a number of nicknames such as Tumbledown Dick because of his abrupt fall from power when the monarchy was restored under King Charles II in 1660. (Alexander A, 1997)

The standard form of a limerick is a stanza of five lines, with the first, second and fifth rhyming with one another and having three feet of three syllables each; and the shorter third and fourth lines also rhyming with each other, but having only two feet of three syllables. The third and fourth lines are usually anapaestic. The first, second and fifth are usually either anapaests or amphibrachs. (Marsh, L, 1997)

Tommy Thumb's book "Pretty Song Book" (Mary Cooper, 1744) contained forty nursery rhymes, many of which are still part of child's play today. It was spelled "Hickere, Dickere Dock" in his historic text. The limerick was largely used by Edward Lear in the 19th century, though the term was not used by him. Edward Lear did not invent the limerick. Although he may have played some part in popularizing the limerick form of poetry in his "The Book of Nonsense" (1845) which was published in 1845 and later in another book in 1872, Lear's 212 limericks were termed as nonsense verse. The concluding line of the limerick usually ended with the final word of the first line:

There once was an old man from Peru  
His poor lamas came down with the flu  
In the valley he passed  
All the people who gasped  
At the beast that was uttering "moo"

Limerick is a humorous, often bawdy verse of five anapaestic lines with the rhyme scheme [a-a-b-b-a] and typically having a [9-9-6-6-9] cadence. The first line usually sets up the idea of the poem, and the last is generally the punch line. Sometimes bawdy, outlandish limericks bring humor and rhyme to the world of poetry. The purpose of using this form is to replace everyday expression with unusual alternative to express emotion and a particular mood by adding eccentricity and weirdness. (Norman Douglas, 1928)

We can find its usage in literature to describe humor and light subject matter, as the first four lines create a joke and it ends on a punch line. It also is used frequently in nursery rhymes to make kids love reading.

The present study sheds light on some sound stylistic features: assonance, onomatopoeia. The function of limerick is usually to convey and create funny and humorous images. The first line traditionally introduces a person and a place, with the place appearing at the end of the first line and establishing the rhyme scheme for the second and fifth lines. A limerick is five lines long with the rhyme scheme a-a-b-b-a. This means that lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme with each other, and lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other. They also have a bouncing rhythm. Limericks are meant to be funny, and often employ elements of literature such as hyperbole, onomatopoeia and alliteration.

Sometimes a limerick poet starts a limerick by thinking what he wants to say by choosing a topic (school, friend) and then thinking what rhymes are available for that word and then creating some sort of story out of them. The first line of a limerick traditionally introduces a person and a place, with the place appearing at the end of the first line and therefore establishing the rhyme scheme for the second and fifth lines. In early limericks, the last line was often essentially a repeat of the first line, although this is no longer customary.

Within the genre, ordinary speech stress is often distorted in the first line, and may be regarded as a feature of the form: "There was a young man from the coast"; "There once was a girl from Detroit..." Legman takes this as a convention whereby prosody is violated simultaneously with propriety. Exploitation of geographical names, especially exotic ones, is also common, and has been seen as invoking memories of geography lessons in order to subvert the decorum taught in the schoolroom; Legman finds that the exchange of limericks is almost exclusive to comparatively well-educated males, women figuring in limericks almost exclusively as "villains or victims". The most prized limericks incorporate a kind of twist, which may be revealed in the final line or lie in the way the rhymes are often intentionally tortured, or both.



Many limericks show some form of internal rhyme, alliteration or assonance, or some element of word play. Verses in limerick form are sometimes combined with a refrain to form a limerick song, a traditional humorous drinking song often with obscene verses. It is the fact that the genre of limerick has stronger power to influence people than other types of poems. For this paper, the limerick poets have collected 40 limericks from Parrot's (*The Penguin Book of Limericks*, 1985). The Penguin Book of Limericks and from Vaughn "Full text of 700 Limerick Lyric: A Collection of Choice Humorous Versifications. These limerick poems are analyzed in terms of three stylistic devices: two are phonetic, assonance and onomatopoeia and one is lexical, which is pun.

The origin of the name limerick for this type of poem is debated. The name is generally taken to be a reference to the City or County of Limerick in Ireland sometimes particularly to the Maigue Poets (cited: [limerickwriterscentres.com](http://limerickwriterscentres.com)), and may derive from an earlier form of nonsense verse parlour game that traditionally included a refrain that included "Will [or won't] you come (up) to Limerick?"

The roots of the limerick genre are to be found in British folklore. Section 5 of the collection of English folk poems, counting rhymes and songs for children. Rhymes of Mother Goose by Charles Perrault (1697), first published in England at the end of the 17th century, also contains the first published limericks. Now it is difficult to know who was the creator of the first limerick and why its name came from the county of Limerick in Ireland. Lear himself did not call his humorous poems "limericks". The word "Limerick" first appeared in print in 1892, after the poet's death. For the first time in Great Britain, the title of the poem is found in the New English Dictionary in 1898, and in American books in 1902.

One way or another, since the end of the 19th century, limericks have become widely known everywhere. Edward Lear used the folk limerick form in his nonsense poetry, making the limerick even more popular. In total, Edward Lear wrote more than two hundred limericks (212), and his "Book of Nonsense" included, in the end, just over a hundred.

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