

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North
Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository:
<http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

Edward Lear and the Liberation of Young Readers Through Nonsense

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in English at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2017

By Josey Dixon

Thesis Director
Dr. Kirk Boyle

Thesis Advisor
Dr. David Hopes

Mr and Mrs Discobbolos

Climbed to the top of a wall,

And they sat to watch the sunset sky

And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry

And the Biscuit Buffalo call. (Lear 1-5)

Describing the genre of nonsense literature, Carolyn Wells states that

“Etymologically speaking, nonsense may be either words without meaning, or words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas” (Wells XXII). With respect to the lines of verse above, it would appear that Edward Lear fits into the confines of the second definition of nonsense, though definitive classification of this poet remains somewhat elusive. Lear’s poetry describes a world that is unfamiliar and unexplored, populated with strange people and creatures with unrecognizable names. His characters embark on absurd and fantastic quests, braving storm-tossed seas in a sieve or on the backs of trusty turtles. A “Yonghy Bonghy Bo” will have his heart broken by a beautiful girl and a pair of sugar-tongs will steal a pony and ride to freedom. The narratives are ludicrous and the characters bizarre, but one feature that remains constant throughout Lear’s nonsense poetry is the impression of deep, embedded meaning that is threaded through nearly every stanza. While Lear utilizes nonsense as a genre, his final goal appears to be sense, the nonsense acting as a vehicle for the many thoughts, feelings, and messages he wishes to convey to his young audience.

Sense, within the context of this discussion, refers to conventionally applied language that uses logical rhetoric to convey specific predetermined meaning. This as opposed to *nonsense*, which subverts logic and reasoning through the manipulation of

language, often resulting in humorous narratives with flexible or indistinct meaning. Contrary to what the term “nonsense” would have readers believe, sense often plays a critical role in the constitution of the genre. Its presence acts as the control in an experiment designed to test the boundaries of linguistic and artistic possibility. Michael B. Heyman comments on the role of sense within nonsense, saying that “while sense does play an essential role in literary nonsense, it is secondary to the rule-breaking tendencies therein, and that, in the end, what the reader is left with is ‘nonsense’—controlled, readable, pleasurable, and perplexing—rather than sense” (Heyman 187). I believe that it is this refusal to follow the rules of syntax and sensibility while still remaining anchored in reality which makes Edward Lear’s poetry both a prime example of nonsense and an important landmark in the history of children’s literature.

Edward Lear was an English artist and poet who is also known, though less commonly, by his pseudonym Derry Down Derry (Hedblad 182). Active during the Victorian era, Lear is noted mainly for his nonsense poetry and is widely viewed as having popularized the limerick (Hedblad 182). Lear was born the twentieth of twenty-one children and was raised by an older sister who took her brother into her care after their family was forced to separate due to economic pressures. Lear suffered various maladies from a young age, his battles with epilepsy and the associated stigma acting as a great source of shame and discouraging him from forming many meaningful relationships outside of his immediate family. Lear feared that the community would discover his epilepsy and it is widely accepted that this contributed to his inability to find a romantic partner. The subsequent isolation led to a life plagued by loneliness and depression (Noakes 37). In addition to his condition, most literary historians and biographers who

have conducted research into Lear's past have concluded that he was a homosexual. While this is not known definitively there is a considerable amount of evidence indicating that it was true. If Lear was in fact homosexual, it can safely be assumed that his sexuality contributed to his failure to find permanent romantic partnership. His unsettled childhood, frail health, and sexuality are considered to be one of the largest sources of inspiration for his work. Loneliness, rejection, the fear of loss, nonconformism, and the search for love are ever present themes throughout his oeuvre.

Throughout my investigation of Lear's work I will examine the mature content that often surfaces within his children's poetry. In the context of this paper the term "mature content" does not refer to anything explicit or particularly obscene, it is simply the terminology that I will use in reference to themes, images, and motifs that would generally be viewed as existing above the comprehension level of a child. This is content that most would classify as too socially or emotionally complex to be central to a work of children's literature. However, Lear uses nonsense as a means of exploring such content with his young readers.

In my thesis I argue that Lear's exploration of mature content through nonsense allows children to grapple with difficult subject matter at their own developmental rate, the humor and subversion of logical reasoning acting as a protective barrier between the child and content beyond their level of comprehension. I will provide an examination of nonsense language and the ways in which it demands active participation from the reader and leads to a high variance in poetic interpretation. My paper will examine the shift in the focus of children's literature that occurred during the Victorian era. In addition to this, I will explore the ways in which Lear's nonsense deviates from typical children's

literature as well as common variations in interpretation of his longer nonsense poems. I will explore the mature themes present within Lear's children's poetry, paying close attention to the ways in which Lear approaches romance, intimacy, and the often correlative inclusion of loneliness and heartbreak. Nonconformism and the rejection of societal norms plays a large role in Lear's children's poetry; therefore, it will be an important component in the examination of Lear's liberation of juvenile readers from the status quo through nonsense.

Familiar Words Made Foreign: The Ways in which Nonsense Language Demands Active Participation from the Reader

Two attributes of Lear's poetry and nonsense in general is the presence of made-up words and the bizarre use of adjectives, their inclusion alone necessitating some level of personal interpretation within the texts. Lear himself creates many of the words that he uses regularly across his oeuvre, but the lack of consistency in their application leads the reader to the conclusion that their meanings shift depending on the context of their use. The unusual combinations of adjectives within Lear's work also adds to the humorous nature of his poetry and contributes to the nonsense for which he was known. The amalgamation of nonsense words, the unique application of adjectives, and his habitually peculiar word choice creates a sense of ambiguous meaning within Lear's work. This invites the reader to make personal interpretations and speculate on possible intended meaning. The most notable nonsense word that is used multiple times across Lear's body of work is the word "runcible," which takes an adjectival form and is used to describe a hat in "Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly," a cat in "The Pobble Who Has No Toes," a spoon in "The Owl and the Pussycat," and a spoon once again in one of his alphabets.

Because there is no obvious definition that can be gathered through contextual analysis, the reader is left to apply whatever definition they see fit, making the meaning of the word flexible and impermanent. A similar effect can be found in “The Daddy Long-Legs and The Fly.” This poem finds a Daddy Long-Legs and a house fly fleeing social rejection by way of the sea. When the characters rush down the beach toward the water they both let out a “sponge-taneous cry,” the presence of the adjective “sponge-taneous” making the cry itself ambiguous and leaving the tone of the characters’ escape up to the interpretation of the reader (Lear 76).

Literary theorist Anna Henchman provides a fresh perspective on Lear’s use of nonsense words in her essay “Fragments Out of Place.” She argues that Lear does not so much create new words with new meanings, as he does rearrange preexisting words and morphemes with the purpose of shifting meaning based on word-sound associations. This playful linguistic dismemberment does not necessarily indicate a complete modification of meaning, but it does shift meaning based on the reader’s personal associations between particular morphemes, suffixes, and roots. It also illustrates the ways in which language can be manipulated without necessarily decimating the original meaning. Henchman comments on meaning’s persistence, noting that, “Whether they are unfamiliar bodies like those of Scroobius Pip, or unfamiliar words such as ‘subsqueakious,’ Lear’s new creations expose the peculiar exchangeability of homologous parts” (Henchman 183). Daniel Brown makes similar observations regarding the ambiguity of language within Lear’s poetry in his essay “Being and Naughtiness” in which he argues that the “significance [of Lear’s nonsense language] ultimately resides not in the whole words but more radically and magically in letters and morphemes” (Brown 179). Brown discusses

Lear's nonsense words not as intentional creations harboring specific meaning, but as flexible portmanteaus designed to be subjective and elastic. Brown asserts that by manipulating language in a way that promotes flexible meaning, Lear "pays tribute to the developmental moment at which the child tentatively recognizes and savours such sounds as purveyors of meaning, as they oscillate between nonsense and sense" (Brown 172).

The natural byproduct of Lear's inclusion of so many nonsensical words, portmanteaus, and onomatopoeias is the transient nature of each poem's meaning. Because the words themselves have no conventional meaning or are removed from the contexts in which they are usually found, the reader is inclined to assign some kind of definition based on personal interpretation, making it possible for interpretations to shift dramatically based on the reader's point of view. As noted by Henchman and Brown, young readers are likely to read nonsense words within Lear's poetry and assign them meaning based on word-sound association. Beyond this, young readers may also use contextual clues to inform their understanding of the unfamiliar language, creating a dynamic in which the continuous relationship between the known and the unknown, meaning and lack of meaning, work together within the reader to create individual interpretation.

The application of nonsense language naturally leads to shifting, unpredictable meaning, a characteristic that is commonly noted by nonsense analysts. This feature is due to the fact that interpretation of Lear's nonsense poetry hinges on the perspective of the reader. Nonsense demands active participation from the reader as comprehension of the subversive language rests on their ability to assign meaning to unfamiliar words and decode foreign combinations of familiar suffixes, roots, and word sounds. When a child reads a nonsense poem by Lear their interpretation of the content is influenced by their

current literacy level, the breadth of their vocabulary, and their conscious or subconscious ability to apply knowledge of familiar language to unfamiliar words. Young readers will build these skills naturally over the course of their literacy development which results in shifting interpretations through time. As children become proficient readers and gain more life experience their ability to apply meaning to nonsense language will increase. Their interpretations will broaden as they gradually grow conscious of the levels of content present within the poetry and become capable of making connections between the content and their own life experiences and knowledge of the world. This characteristic of Lear's work may not seem particularly significant or unusual by contemporary literary standards, but it was practically unheard of during the period in which Lear was actively writing for an audience of children.

The Evolution of Children's Literature: What Changed in the Nineteenth Century?

Prior to discussing close readings of Lear's nonsense, is imperative that his work be placed within the literary context from which it came. Children's literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was characterized by a harsh didacticism that left little to the imagination. Such works were representative of the contemporary view of the eighteenth century child, a complex and contradictory perspective that combined Enlightenment era rational practicality and Evangelical moralistic expectations. As one might expect, literature emerging from this instructive and homiletic milieu was not particularly thrilling by today's standards, a fact that did not escape literary historian Michael B Heyman who examines the shift that occurred in children's literature over the course of the nineteenth century. In his dissertation Heyman characterizes literature leading up to the turn of the century, stating that "By 1800, moralistic children's literature

wholly dominated the market which had all but forgotten imaginative, less didactic work” (Heyman 24). These texts targeting young readers were considered progressive for the time period, the previously well-loved fairytale slowly being cast aside in favor of more practical reading material that drew heavily from the philosophies of Enlightenment thinkers like Locke and Rousseau (Heyman 24). Texts of this nature seem to rely heavily on the adult perception of the child, re-envisioned as programmatic and requiring strict moralistic guidelines. Heyman comments on readers of early nineteenth century children’s literature, noting that “The unlucky recipients dined on verse and prose, perhaps written by Sarah Trimmer or Hannah More, alternatively viciously or blandly didactic, representing unrealistic children, in a world reduced to the size of what was perceived as the child's mind” (Heyman 24).

Fortunately, this literary shift toward religious, practical, and informational texts for children was reasonably short lived. The early-mid nineteenth century was marked by great social and industrial progress in Europe, advances in technology and transportation marking major shifts in European society. The strides being made within big business and industrialization had major impacts on economic growth and the distribution of wealth, particularly in relation to the British middle class, which was experiencing significant expansion (Butts 153). Dennis Butts explores the impacts of industrialization on literature in “How Children’s Literature Changed: What Happened in the 1840’s?” In his article, Butts describes how the changing economic climate impacted the way the British middle class perceived the family unit, remarking that “The dominant middle-class ideology, based upon the enthusiastic embracing of laissez-faire capitalism, and a hierarchical view of society, especially with authoritarian parents and submissive children, began to

change” (Butts 159). The spread of secularism and abandonment of strict puritan ideals affected the world of children’s literature, as did the growing social consciousness surrounding the expectations for children in the work force. Across Britain citizens and politicians began to challenge working conditions for children in factories and mines and these shifting expectations for the young were reflected in their reading material (Butts 160). Butts summarizes:

The changes in children's books in the 1840s, in other words, reflect the changing values of a new Age. The emerging children's literature, with its growing tolerance of children's playful behaviour, its recognition of the importance of feelings as opposed to reliance upon reason and repression, and its relaxation of didacticism because it was less certain of dogmas, all reflect what was happening in the world beyond children's books. (Butts 162)

The changing social and political climate of the mid-nineteenth century did not create a subtle, temporary shift in children’s literature. Rather, it changed the genre as a whole and marked the beginning of what most would consider modern literature for young readers. Deborah Thacker and Jean Webb comment on this in their article “Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism,” in which they state, “This period, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, is considered to signify the development of the distinctiveness of children’s literature as a form, and produced a number of enduring works . . . which define a narrative approach which seems to speak directly to children” (Thacker and Webb 41). The approach that Thacker and Webb outline is that which would be most familiar to readers today. The emphasis within such works is not on the child as the recipient of predetermined concrete

information that is meant to mold the reader into the adult vision of the perfect child. Rather, readers of modern children's literature engage with narratives meant to entertain first and inform second, the child contributing to the experience with their own background and understanding, all of which will impact how the text is accepted and interpreted. Edward Lear was not particularly enthusiastic about bland didacticism within children's literature. Michael Heyman observes, "Though he rarely comments on any of his reading, he must have found the contemporary children's literature quite depressing. His rare, but enthusiastic reaction to what we would now call more progressive children's literature... perhaps indicates his tastes" (Heyman 23). Lear is often cited as a major influence on the popularization of this new brand of children's literature as the publication of *A Book of Nonsense* is noted as a major landmark in the growing demand for humorous and entertaining texts for young readers (Heyman 23). In addition to the emphasis on farce and entertainment within his work, Lear makes a habit of embedding his children's poetry with ruminations on complex social and personal issues. It might be expected that the inclusion of such themes within children's literature would stand in stark contrast to the lighthearted humor also present within Lear's verse. However, the opposite appears to be true as the playful nature of the nonsense language acts as a screen through which young readers can access the mature content as they become developmentally prepared to grasp it. This screen of humor and unfamiliar vocabulary protects the child from themes that they cannot yet comprehend while still allowing them to make contact with discussions of mature subject matter in a controlled, developmentally gradual environment.

Edward Lear's Nonsense: A Different Kind of Children's Literature

Lear stands apart from his literary contemporaries because the content of his poetry varied so notably from that which was being written for young audiences during the mid-nineteenth century. The inclusion of mature content within this children's poetry speaks to Lear's attitude towards his young readership, the presence of such subject matter indicating that he viewed children as being capable of confronting complicated social and personal issues within literature. A new and remarkably fresh brand of children's literature ventured onto the scene with the publication of *A Book of Nonsense* in 1846, the content of which varied from poetic alphabets and limericks, to longer works of narrative nonsense. *A Book of Nonsense* differed dramatically from the classic children's literature of the early nineteenth century. It diverged notably from the newly progressive texts that were being written and marketed for young audiences, though it did so by merely expanding on a preexisting literary trend. The previously discussed shift in children's literature springs from the novel assumption on the part of the author that child readers are capable of understanding messages embedded within works of fiction.

Deborah Thacker and Jean Webb expand on this transition toward the modern vision of the young reader, stating that "The perceived ability of children to understand, at some innate level, the messages offered suggests a heightened sensibility and a possible rescue from the troubled adult psyche" (Thacker and Webb 43). They continue "While this might not be true of actual child readers, the need to retain an image of the child as some kind of ideal reader can be seen as a motivating force in much of the classic children's literature of the period" (Thacker and Webb 43). Lear certainly saw children as the ideal audience, his oeuvre acting as a testament to his belief in the child's capacity to interpret works of literature and absorb embedded meaning. His poetry exemplifies the playful

accessibility necessary to capture the attention of young readers while simultaneously offering up complex discussions of mature subject matter, a paradoxical combination that sets his poems apart as verse which ages particularly well with its audience. Consider the poem “Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow,” which captures both Lear’s lively, light-hearted style and his tendency to use these qualities as a means of sugar-coating darker ruminations. The poem describes a conversation between two nesting sparrows in which they express their sadness and worry that the other will fall ill because they do not have a hat. Mr. Spikky Sparrow takes his wife to London and they return, fully clothed. Upon seeing their parents the fledgling sparrows cry,

'O Ma and Pa!

'How truly beautiful you are!'

Said they, 'We trust that cold or pain

'We shall never feel again!

'While, perched on tree, or house, or steeple,

'We now shall look like other people.

'Witchy witchy witchy wee,

'Twikky mikky bikky bee,

‘Zikky sikky tee. (Lear 69-77)

Each stanza in the poem ends with some variation of lines seventy-five through seventy-seven, the pleasant nonsense words mimicking a conversation between songbirds. Concluding each stanza with nonsense adds a level of cheerful absurdity to the verse. The poem remains reasonably light-hearted until the final stanza in which the children say, “We trust that fear or pain / We shall never feel again” (Lear 71-72). This

casts a sombre quality over the lines and shifts the tone of the poem away from pure, light hearted farce. Most children would certainly overlook the melancholic aspects of this poem, the silliness that is foundational to Lear's verse disguising any darkness present in the lines. However, a perceptive young reader or a child who has matured and revisited the text might recognize an underlying discussion of mature subject matter: the value of material wealth, the dangers of poverty, and the importance of family security act as embedded social commentary within "Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow."

Another poem that highlights Lear's tendency to blend nonsense, humor, and the grotesque within his children's poetry is "The Two Old Bachelors," in which two impoverished, hungry men find a muffin and mouse in their home. The old bachelors go to town in an attempt to purchase sage and onion for stuffing so that they might make a meal out of the mouse. They acquire onion, but no sage. However, they are told that an old sage lives on the top of a nearby hill and they immediately form plans to chop him up and make him into stuffing. They climb the hill and inform the sage of their plans, at which point, "that old Sage looked calmly up, and with his awful book, / At those two Bachelors' bald heads a certain aim he took" (Lear 31-32). Using his book of wisdom, the sage strikes the bachelors off the mountainside and they roll all the way back to their house where they discover that the mouse has eaten their muffin and fled. The poem ends, "They left their home in silence by the once convivial door / and from that hour those Bachelors were never heard from more" (Lear 38-39). The fate of the two old bachelors is left up to the imagination of the reader, though the tone of the culminating lines indicates a gloomy outcome.

From an adult perspective this poem is quite shocking. While there is humor in the miscommunication regarding the double entendre of the word “sage,” the disturbing narrative of cannibalism is at odds with both the ludic language of the poem and the comprehension level of its intended audience. To be sure, “The Two Old Bachelors” is an extreme example of the bifurcation of content and tone that is often present in Lear’s work, but the fact cannot be ignored that this poem appears in many of his collections intended for children. The degree to which young readers will analyze the poem for meaning is questionable. Surely the issues of poverty, hunger, and violence will occur to children reading or hearing “The Two Old Bachelors,” but these details are unlikely to overpower the narrative that, to a child, appears silly and ridiculous. It is unclear how much meaning Lear expected his young readership to deduce from the poem, but his inclusion of such mature subject matter speaks to his belief in children’s ability to glean significance from nonsense verse.

As a child I was quite fond of “The Two Old Bachelors” and requested the poem often. My father would provide dramatic readings that highlighted grotesque moments within the verse -- the plot to murder the sage, the image of the sage being chopped up for stuffing, and the sage’s violent retaliation when he is made aware of the bachelors’ plan. I certainly found the poem creepy, but the absurdist humor of the situation eclipsed the dark social commentary within the lines. While I was capable of processing the grisly notion of intended cannibalism, it wasn’t until I revisited the poem years later that I began to detect a second level of meaning previously obscured by the humor of the nonsense language. What first appeared to be a dark and goofy narrative with little embedded meaning began to read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of

homosexuality. Lear writes about two single men cohabitating under a single roof. When they find themselves with nothing to eat they set out on a quest to kill and consume the sage who lives on the hill. This decision is emblematic of some perceived, inherent immorality which positions the bachelors against faith and philosophy. When faced with the bachelors, the sage literally beats them with his book of wisdom, an image symbolic of the conflict between faith and non-heteronormative behavior. Upon discovering that what little they had is gone, the bachelors flee, their fates tragically undetermined.

Contemporary scholars regard this homoerotic poetic interpretation as the most common and fairly obvious, given the time period in which “The Two Old Bachelors” was written. It is likely that this poem was inspired by Lear’s personal struggle to find agreement between his faith and his sexuality, which he saw as unnatural and indicative of some internal defect. It is likely that this poem was inspired by Lear’s personal struggle to find agreement between his faith and his sexuality, which he saw as unnatural and indicative of some internal defect. Conscious that others share this struggle, Lear most likely created the narrative of “The Two Old Bachelors” as a means of exposing young readers to the experience of having a personal identity not considered acceptable by nineteenth-century British social standards.

Indeed, Lear’s children’s poetry often engages a range of mature subjects veiled by playful nonsense, but the way in which such discussions are delivered creates a dynamic that allows children to interpret the poetry’s latent meaning as they develop and become capable of processing it. Lear’s method of using nonsense to convey meaning allows young readers to approach the social and personal issues embedded within the poetry at their own maturity rate. The reader is free to either take the poem at face value

or analyze characters, setting, and word choice in the context of the narrative with the intention of finding personal meaning. Commenting on the child's ability to interpret literature in *The Fantastic Imagination*, George McDonald writes, "But indeed your children are not likely to trouble you about the meaning. They find what they are capable of finding, and more would be too much" (McDonald 64).

Lear and Love: Intimacy and Abandonment in Edward Lear's Nonsense Poetry

Two elements that young readers might commonly observe within Lear's nonsense poetry are those of romantic intimacy and romantic rejection. Lear never married and lived a somewhat lonely life, isolated by the fear of his epilepsy being discovered, his chronic depression, and his own complicated sexuality. It is widely known that Lear lacked a fulfilling personal life. Haunted by consistent disappointment throughout his adulthood, it is no wonder that romantic intimacy, rejection, and loneliness became common themes within Lear's longer narrative poems. Many literary analysts have conducted investigations into Lear's poems "The Owl and the Pussycat" and "The Courtship of the Yongy Bonghy Bo." Dissections of these poems are especially common as both explore love and loneliness and are generally considered to have been inspired by Lear's personal experiences with intimacy and rejection. "The Owl and the Pussycat" is perhaps the most well-known of Lear's narrative poems and is a rare example of romantic verse by Lear in which he allows his characters a happy ending. The verses follow an idyllic courtship between a cat and an owl, the poem beginning,

The Owl and the Pussy-Cat went to sea

In a beautiful pea-green boat:

They took some honey, and plenty of money

Wrapped up in a five-pound note. (Lear 1-4)

The two decide to marry and sail away “for a year and a day, To the land where the bong-tree grows” (Lear 16-17). They purchase a wedding band from a “Piggy-wig” and are married by “the turkey who lives on the hill,” after which they spend their wedding night in a solitary, moonlit dance (Lear 18, 26). It is unlike Lear to allow his protagonists to engage in romantic love and get away with it scot-free, their hearts unbroken, their psyches undamaged by the pain of rejection and loneliness. Perhaps the Owl and the Pussycat receive this special treatment because they are already so removed from the rest of the world, their love for one another existing as a detached point of light in a sea of isolation.

When approaching romantic love within his nonsense poetry Lear often takes an ‘us against the world’ perspective, a habit which indicates that he felt that there was some inherent relationship between romantic intimacy and isolation. Edmund Miller examines this trope in his article “Two Approaches to Edward Lear’s Nonsense Songs.” Miller argues that one key attribute of Lear’s most effective romantic poems is the “melancholy apartness of the characters from any kind of traditionally organized society” (Miller 5). Miller asserts that the romance and intimacy found within many of Lear’s poems derives from the concept of two characters who are generally considered incompatible finding companionship in one another, as exemplified in “The Owl and the Pussycat.” Miller asserts that this strange romance could not exist within the confines of a decent, organized society as it would be rejected by the status quo. However, this type of union flourishes within Lear’s green world because the setting is so isolated that the romance

between the unlikely lovers is the only thing that truly exists. With regard to the relationship between the owl and the pussycat, Miller states that:

Lear's theme is not simply that all creatures love one another in his dehumanized green world. His moral is narrower, less traditional. He seems to be saying something like: This perverse relationship between two animals is the only one left and the only one available because these are the only two creatures about in the naked landscape of the green world. (Miller 6)

Surely the romance within "The Owl and the Pussycat" is partially derived from and magnified by the characters' isolation and the taboo nature of their relationship, though it is probable that it also derives from Lear's need to reject his own romantic failures through his poetry. K. Harel applies a psychoanalytic lens to "The Owl and the Pussycat" in her article "A Natural History of the Owl and the Pussycat," in which she examines the ways in which Lear designed the perfect romance by allowing his characters to completely circumvent any and all common romantic problems, arguing that:

The accuracy [of the romance] is in the precision with which Lear steers the story clear of every rocky romantic obstacle he crashed into. *The Owl and the Pussycat* is an idyll of alliance because the two avoid Lear's every quandary about intimacy, quandaries familiar to those of us who navigate humankind to find a beloved and constant companion. (Harel 483)

The Owl and the Pussycat begin their romance with everything they need and are given the opportunity to engage in pure romantic bliss, entirely free from conflict and obligations that accompany the burden of existing in a practical world. It is likely that

Lear created this narrative as an escape from his own romantic failings, his inability to find love due to his poor mental and physical health prompting him to create a world in which romance exists in its purest and most uncomplicated form.

It is also important to note that Lear never specifies the gender of either the owl or the pussycat, though one might assign specific gender to the characters based on context clues. In her monograph *Edward Lear*, Ina Rae Hark comments on Lear's failure to gender his characters in "The Owl and the Pussycat." Hark notes that beyond the obvious mismatch that occurs in this interspecies union, there may in fact be "sexual confusion" that necessitates a union beyond the confines of organized society (Hark 57). It is reasonable to assume that the owl and the pussycat's indeterminate genders are a byproduct of Lear's own sexual orientation, the need to identify with his characters necessitating that he leave their genders ambiguous. Hark makes this claim, stating that "Subconsciously, perhaps, Lear is leaving the lovers' respective sexes ambiguous, and making them different species, in order to portray his conflicting desires for both the security of conventional marriage and, the deeper need, for love from his closest male friends" (Hark 57). Regardless of his reasoning, Lear chooses to allow his protagonists a romantic victory in this poem, a rare occurrence in Lear's poetic world of "melancholy apartness" (Miller 5).

Lear's "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo" stands in stark contrast to "The Owl and The Pussycat" with regard to intimacy and romantic fulfillment. The poem's protagonist is a character identified only as "the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo," an individual who lives "on the coast of Coromandel" and whose only possessions consist of, "two old chairs, and half a candle, / one old jug without a handle" (Lear 1, 5-6). The

Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo falls in love with a young woman named Lady Jingly Jones, professing his love for her and requesting her hand in marriage. He offers her his worldly possessions and briefly describes their life together, comparing the depth of his love to the sea. Tragically, Lady Jingly is already promised to a businessman in England and she is forced to tearfully reject The Bo, doing so with great regret before sending him away. In response, The Bo rushes down to the sea and rides away on the back of a turtle:

Through the silent-roaring ocean
 Did the Turtle swiftly go;
 Holding fast upon his shell
 Rode the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 With a sad primeval motion
 Towards the sunset isles of Boshen
 Still the Turtle bore him well.
 Holding fast upon his shell,
 “Lady Jingly Jones, farewell!” (Lear 89-97)

“The Owl and the Pussycat” and “The Courtship of the Yhongy Bhongy Bo” portray very different love stories. The first poem represents the triumph of love over limiting social expectations of romance. It demonstrates the ways in which intimacy constrained by the dominant culture’s social parameters becomes unselfconscious and uninhibited once given the opportunity to flourish outside of conventional society. This love exists beyond the sea, in a nonsense world identified only as, “the land where the Bong-Tree grows,” as unreal and unrecognizable to the reader as the interspecies romance itself (Lear 94). “The Courtship of the Yhongy Bhongy Bo” takes place on the

coast of Coromandel, which might refer either to the Coromandel Coast, a southeastern region of India, or the Coromandel Peninsula of New Zealand. Regardless of the exact location, it would seem that The Bo exists in the real world, a detail that identifies the romance within this poem as that which Lear views as most reasonable and realistic. This poem reads almost as an answer to the romantic optimism displayed in “The Owl and the Pussycat,” the divarication of Lear’s expectations for love displayed in the vastly different romantic outcomes. If “The Owl and the Pussycat” says to young readers, ‘romantic fulfillment is possible,’ then “The Courtship of the Yhongy Bhongy Bo” answers, ‘not for outcasts and nonconformist, not in the real world.’ When The Bo is rejected, he leaves Coromandel and sets out across the sea towards “the sunset isles of Boshen,” a fictional land that, if the pattern continues, may prove to be more hospitable to this nonsense protagonist (Lear 17). While these poems entertain with their silliness and absurd treatment of the English language, Lear endows both with deep romantic significance, the difference between romantic victory and romantic failure stemming from the setting: victories take place in the world of nonsense, failure takes place in the real world. Through his nonsense poetry Lear communicates to his young audience that some kinds of love must be sought beyond the confines of societal norms. This often involves escaping the world in which this love is not accepted, finding deliverance from rejection through self-isolation and the repudiation of the status quo.

On the Outside Looking In: Nonsense as a Means of Promoting Nonconformism Among Children

Lear was himself an open nonconformist and was largely detached from mainstream culture. His health and sexuality were isolating factors throughout his

lifetime and he seemed to find conforming to society's expectations of the nineteenth century man a difficult endeavor. Lear struggled when it came to forming meaningful relationships and seemed always to exist on the outskirts of society, loneliness and solitude influencing both his personal mental health and, subsequently, his poetry. Ina Rae Hark explores Lear's approach to societal norms within his nonsense poetry in her journal article "Edward Lear: Eccentricity and Victorian Angst." Hark observes that Lear's work provides a multitude of perspectives for readers and takes a biographical approach, seeing Lear's engagement with societal norms as an exploration of the self. Hark also sees Lear's struggle with his own individuality as his primary inspiration, stating that, "most critics would agree that the dilemma of the individual in an oppressive environment which the Nonsense portrays is more precisely the dilemma of Lear himself" (Hark 113).

As an individual who found it difficult to conform to social standards and regulations, Lear takes on the role of social dissident within his poetry, creating a range of characters that exist outside the confines of traditional society. These are sometimes characters that are unable to conform to society's expectations but, more regularly, characters that *refuse* to reconcile their personal needs with the expectations of their community and instead choose to exist as they are or leave in search of a place where their identities will be embraced. The former perspective is best exemplified in "The Daddy Long-Legs and The Fly," in which the reader is drawn through a narrative in which a Daddy Long-Legs and a housefly interact over shared despair. Both are incapable of reaching some goal because of a physical attribute, the Fly because his legs

are too short and the Daddy Long-Legs because his legs are too long. In the end, neither can bear the weight of their current existence and run,

Downward to the foaming sea
With one sponge-tenious cry;
And there they found a little boat,
Whose sails were pink and gray;
And off they sailed among the waves,
Far, and far away. (Lear 75-80)

The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly sail to “the great Gromboolian plain,” never return, living out the rest of their days together (Lear 82). This poem is based around an examination of physical disabilities and the social disadvantages that accompany them, obvious parallels between the characters’ identity crises and Lear’s struggles with his own physical limitations being present within the lines. The characters’ painful effort to live with their legs represents the difficulty of meeting social standards, their escape in the boat symbolizing their personal rejection of societal expectations and their desire to find a place where they are accepted. Lear may have struggled in succeeding to find a place where he could unapologetically flaunt his true self, but he does not want this pain to be shared by the next generation. His promotion of nonconformism within his poetry speaks to the degree to which he wishes for his young readership to embrace their personal identities, though he does not shield his readers from the fact that nonconformism often leads to isolation and loneliness. The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly may have embraced themselves as they are once on the Gromboolian plain, but there is

no indication that they are not entirely alone there, though they have each other, and that is significant.

Sarah Minslow examines the ways in which Lear's poetry engages child readers in an active conversation about the construction of knowledge. Minslow describes this characteristic of Lear's work as "anti-colonizing" and argues that its purpose within the context of society was to help children question dominant social structures by exposing them to a wide range of perspectives and opinions. In "Challenging the Impossibility of Children's Literature: The Emancipatory Qualities of Edward Lear's Nonsense," Minslow articulates this perspective concisely, stating that,

Within nonsense literature, many worldviews, or voices, are represented from various perspectives, and it is left up to the child reader to decide "right" from "wrong," "normal" from "abnormal," or "self" from "other" and to consider why those distinctions are made and whose interests making them serves. (Minslow 52)

This, she says, is at odds with other Victorian children's literature which she argues served mainly to impart specific didactic messages, or to "colonize" the mind of the child. Nonsense she says, and specifically Lear's, helps child readers understand the structure of social constructs and how the rejection of such constructs can be significant: "In a Victorian culture steeped in strict gender and social class rules, Lear's nonsense offers child readers a space to consider who makes those rules and how they are enforced, especially through the threat of social rejection" (Minslow 48).

Repudiation of the status quo is a theme present in several of Lear's longer narrative works of nonsense, but none display this characteristic quite as boldly as "The

Nutcracker and the Sugar-Tongs.” In this poem the reader is introduced to a pair of nutcrackers and a pair of sugar-tongs who wish to escape the kitchen and live out their days exploring the natural world on horseback. The Nutcracker inquires to his companion, “Must we drag on this stupid existence for ever, / So idle so weary, so full of remorse?” (Lear 5-6). Together they scheme to steal two ponies from the stable and enact their plan, much to the astonishment and alarm of the kitchen’s other inhabitants: “The Mustard-pot climbed up the Gooseberry Pies, / The Soup-ladle peeped through a heap of Veal Patties, / And squeaked with a ladle-like scream of surprise” (Lear 30-32). At one point a frying pan refers to the situation as, “An awful delusion,” a comment that positions the nonconformism being displayed as inherently negative in the eyes of the kitchen society (Lear 33). The term “delusion” is generally associated with mental disorders that involve hallucinations and self-deceptions that contradict reality. It is interesting that Lear would employ this word in the context of this narrative as it implies that the majority of the characters see their life experiences as invariable and compulsory. In their eyes there is no alternative to the lifestyle that they lead and anyone who strives to move beyond this experience is unhinged and impractical. Despite the backlash that their flight to freedom receives, the Nutcracker and the Sugar-Tongs are successful in their escape and ride far from the place that held them social prisoner for so long:

They rode through the street, and they rode by the station,

They galloped away to the beautiful shore;

In silence they rode, and 'made no observation',

Save this: 'We will never go back any more!' (Lear 41-44)

“The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs” is a prime example of social dissension within Lear’s nonsense poetry and it acts as a witness to Sarah Minslow’s assertion that Lear’s children’s poetry prompts young readers to question dominant social constructs. As the Nutcracker and the Sugar-Tongs liberate themselves from the confines of their limiting society, the reader is exposed to a narrative in which opposition against the dominant social structure is successful and rewarding. This poetic manifestation of nonconformism is not subtle, to the contrary, it is the dominant thematic presence within the verse. However, this poem will still appear light hearted to typical child reader as the nonsense language and the humorous personification of common household items act as a diversion away from the social commentary embedded within the lines. Yes, young readers will still most likely come away with some vague sense of Lear’s purpose, the feeling that, for some of us, true happiness exists beyond the confines of society and sense, in a *runcible* place where freedom reigns and nonsense bends the rules.

Lear Looking Back: The Life and Poetry of the Father of Nonsense

Carolyn Wells describes nonsense as, “either words without meaning, or words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas” (Wells XXII). While it is obvious that Lear does in fact employ unique vocabulary that escapes definition, the contexts in which he applies it endows his nonsensical dialect with deep significance. Lear administers his fanciful poetry to young readers, using nonsense as a means of cloaking examinations of complex personal philosophies. In this way his variety of nonsense moves beyond Wells’ definition of the genre and becomes a literary style of its own, a brand of literature that blends the familiar with the fantastical and balances sense and the absence of sense to

generate playful children's poetry that harbors profound explorations of society and the self.

Edward Lear lived a lonely life on the outskirts of a world that seemed nearly inhospitable to a man of such singular eccentricity. Constantly burdened by the weight of a society that did not accept him, he set out to write himself into a world that he saw as having room for an individual like himself, a world in which he was not the strangest inhabitant, and certainly not the most tragic. Isolated by his frail health and homosexuality, Lear lived with the fear of social rejection as a constant companion and established himself as a true social dissident when he began to write nonsense poetry for children that promotes nonconformism and the rejection of societal norms. He allowed his personal life to bleed into his work as his experiences with romantic intimacy and, more frequently, romantic rejection persistently made their way into his lines. Loneliness was such a prominent figure in the life of this poet that it became an almost constant presence within his work, a thematic phantom whose impression can be caught around nearly every nonsensical bend. Social rejection, isolation, issues of identity, intimacy, and loneliness, all concepts that one would not expect to find as prominent themes within children's literature. But Lear did not shy away from the painful truths that sometimes dominate the human experience and strove to prepare his young audience for a world in which social alienation is a difficult reality. Using nonsense and humor, Lear disguises discussions of mature subject matter so that child readers have the opportunity to access complex commentary on authentic life experiences. He rejects the common thematic boundaries of the Victorian age and ventures far beyond the norm, dismissing the harsh

didacticism typical of children's literature of his period and instead choosing to apply nonsense to promote personal interpretation and active reader participation.

Lear trusts in his young audience's ability to absorb embedded meaning and creates for them fantastical nonsense verses that delight and entertain while simultaneously promoting deep contemplation. He applies subversive language, self-generated words, and illogical rhetoric to generate a new brand of children's poetry. Lear's nonsense functions as a screen through which meaning trickles down to his young readership as they develop and mature, the complex social issues and explorations of identity embedded within the lines becoming clearer as the reader's life experience and knowledge of the world expands. By allowing his young audience to access mature subject matter through nonsense, Lear encourages children to delve into the convoluted realities of the human experience as they emotionally mature and become developmentally prepared to grasp them. In doing this Lear exposes his young readers to the discomfort experienced by the individual dissenter in an oppressive society while simultaneously equipping them with the knowledge and the tools necessary to escape such a place. Yes, the world of man is cruel and unforgiving, but the world of nonsense is just across the sea, a mere turtle ride away, and it calls out madly to the nonconformists and social outcasts: "you are not alone and you are welcome here."

Works Cited

- Brown, Daniel. "Being and Naughtiness." *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, Edited by James Williams and Matthew Bevis, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 162-182.
- Butts, Dennis. (1997). How children's literature changed: What happened in the 1840s? *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 21(2), 153-162.
- Hark, Ina Rea. *Edward Lear*. Twayne Publishers, 1982.
- Hark, Ina Rae. "Edward Lear: Eccentricity and Victorian Angst." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, 1978, pp. 112-122.
- Harel, K. (2015). A natural history of "the owl and the pussycat". *Southwest Review*, vol. 100(4), pp. 481-492, 625.
- Hedblad, Alan. *Something About the Author*. Gale, Vol. 100, 1999, pp. 146-150.
- Henchman, Anna. "Fragments Out of Place: Homology and the Logic of Nonsense in Edward Lear." *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, Edited by James Williams and Matthew Bevis, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 183-201.
- Heyman, B. Michael. A New Defense of Nonsense; or, Where Then is his Phallus? And Other Questions Not to Ask. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 24, 1999, pp. 187-194.
- Heyman, B. Michael. *Isles of Boshen: Edward Lear's Literary Nonsense in Context*. Dissertation, University of Glasgow. 1999.
- McDonald, George. "The Fantastic Imagination." *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, editing by Dan Sandner, Praeger Publishers, 2004, 64-69.
- Miller, Edmund. "Two Approaches to Edward Lear's Nonsense Songs." *Victorian Newsletter*, vol. 44, 1973, pp. 5.8.

- Minslow, S. (2015). Challenging the impossibility of children's literature: The emancipatory qualities of edward lear's nonsense. *Bookbird*, 53(3), 46-55.
- Noakes, Vivian. *Edward Lear*. William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1968.
- Rieder, J. (1998). Edward lear's limericks: The function of children's nonsense poetry. *Children's Literature*, 26, 47-60.
- Thacker, Deborah Cogan, and Jean Webb. *Introducing Children's Literature : From Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Taylor and Francis, 2002.
- Wells, Carolyn. *A Nonsense Anthology*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.