

Edward Lear fantasy podcast script

1. Title page

Welcome to this short introduction to Edward Lear and Fantasy. Edward Lear was born in North London in 1812 and died in Northwestern Italy in 1888.

Lear was a popular Victorian artist, illustrator, musician, author and poet. He's most well known today as the father of English 'nonsense', and is especially famed for his limericks, a form he popularised.

2. Lear's books

His hugely popular books included *A Book of Nonsense*, *Nonsense Songs and Stories*, *More Nonsense*, *Laughable Lyrics*, *Nonsense Alphabets*, and *Nonsense Botany*, all variously published between 1846 and the end of his life.

3. Fantasy vs Nonsense

When thinking about Lear and fantasy as a *genre*, it feels important to consider the difference between the terms 'fantastical' and 'nonsensical'.

- fantastical = 'imaginative or fanciful; remote from reality';
- nonsensical = 'having no meaning; making no sense', ridiculously impractical or ill-advised'

That is to say, Lear's writing is fantastical, which makes him a fantasy writer, but his work's strong sense of the ridiculous and satirical also makes him a nonsense writer. The same might be said of Lewis Carroll, whose works often seek above all to entertain.

According to Stephen Prickett, Victorian fantasy flourished in opposition to the repressive social and intellectual conditions of 'Victorianism'. Victorian writers such as Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald all used non-realistic techniques such as nonsense, dreams, visions, and the creation of other worlds to extend our understanding of this world and to question and escape from the ideology of Victorian culture and society. With Lear, that escape often comes in the form of laughter.

4. Lear + limerick

To take a famous Learical example :

There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!—
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

It's a fantastical idea that seven birds could build nests in one man's beard. But it's also a nonsensical one, in which Lear satirises the fashion for glorious beards at the time while ridiculing his own distinctively overlarge and unruly beard.

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As this limerick demonstrates, Lear's fantastical nonsense particularly enjoys putting animals and humans beside each other, in the vein of many traditional fantasy narratives.

5. Illustrator of Animals.

One of his first jobs as an artist was to illustrate the birds and animals in a vast private zoo set up by the Earl of Derby on his estate near Liverpool.

Painting the Earl's animals from life was a key inspiration for Lear's fantastical nonsense, where animals (and especially birds) appear here there and everywhere, illustrated cartoonishly, often causing trouble or confusion and provoking laughter.

6. Fantastical Creatures

In Lear's nonsense oeuvre, actual animals also rub shoulders with entirely fantastical creatures, such as the Nupiter Piffkin, Biscuit Buffalo, the Quangle Wangle, the Dong with the Luminous Nose, the the Yonghy Bongy Bo, the Fimble Fowl, the Pobble who has no toes, and the blue baboon who played the flute.

Curiously and perhaps deliberately, Lear's fantastical creatures are often not illustrated, and when they are they tend to suggest a combination of the animal or vegetable and the human, with phonetically expressive names that reach back to babytalk and the condition of expressing our feelings with sounds and not words. The illustrations, too, have a childish quality – deliberately crude and comical.

Lear's fantastical nonsense was aimed primarily at children, but also delighted, and continues to delight adults.

His books were some of the first to mark the 'Golden Age' of children's literature, in which all kinds of fantasies emerged, which crossed-over child and adult readerships. For example, Lear's work (first published in 1846) predates Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (1902), J.M Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). It thus forms part of the fantastical literature which set the stage for the later fantasies of the 20th century by Lewis and Tolkien.

7. Encyclopaedia of Fantasy

In Lear's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), John Clute writes that Although [his] poetry makes no "literal" or mundane sense, many of his narrative poems have an internal consistency – and indeed pathetic intensity – that gives his work close affinity to later fantasy.'

'Internal consistency' draws on Tolkien's essay on fairy stories, where he writes that 'no story can be successful without maintaining the inner consistency of reality.' Tolkien argues that the true fantasy writer creates a *secondary world* for their reader to enter, where he related what is true'. 'Pathetic intensity' refers to Tolkien's sense of fantasy as meaningful, and in part an allegorical reflection of the real world.

8. Secondary world pics

Lear's fantastical creatures don't just inhabit their own songs and poems, but pop up all over his wider repertoire, so that his oeuvre indeed provides a 'secondary world' for his readers to enter. This fantastical world not only included verses, songs, and stories, but recipes, botanics, and alphabets. As W. H. Auden writes at the end of his poem on Lear's nonsense: 'He became a land' and children swarmed to him like settlers.

9. Owl & P, Jumblies and Dong

Clute adds that poems like "The Owl and the Pussycat" and "The Jumblies" are 'sustained fantasy narratives' and that "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" is 'a verse tale whose pathos – the Dong being clearly Edward Lear himself – quite overshadows the "absurdity" of the events depicted'.

All three these narratives provoke a sense of otherworldly and fanciful wonder, describing heroic figures making epic journeys across far-away magical lands. That wondrousness and detachment from reality is a key aspect of Lear's work.

10. Nonsense words

Lear's private fantastical language, for example, is both a pleasure and a provocation, not only making you laugh but also imagine.

Some of his invented nonsense words include.

'Runcible'

'Scroobious'

Gromboolian

fizzgiggious

spongetaneous

There are various critical interpretations of what these mean, but to me, Lear's nonsense words are deliberate evasions or contortions of sense where sense just doesn't do justice to the thing or feeling in question. According to Stephen Prickett, Nonsense offered the Victorians an alternative language for coping with the conditions of a world at once more complicated and more repressive.

11. Tolkien's limericks

Lear's work has had a huge influence on fantasy literature at large. The young Tolkien, for example, invented a private language called 'Nevbosh' and wrote limericks in it. One of his efforts went:

("There was an old man who said 'How / Can I possibly carry my cow? / For if I were to ask it /To get in my basket / It would make such a terrible row!' ")

Tolkien also constructed alphabets at school with code symbols for each letter.

12. Self-portraits

Ursula Le Guin argues that 'Fantasy is the language of the inner self'.

And, as many critics have viewed Tolkien's fantasy narratives as allegories for his experiences during the war, Lear's fantasy narratives often reflect his personal struggles with persistent illness, depression, loneliness, and heartbreak. As Peter Swaab describes it, Lear's nonsense songs 'transform woes relatable to his own into absurd and magical narratives' which both abstract from his life and reflect it.

For example, 'The Courtship of the Yonghy Bonghy Bo' is about heartbreak and Lear's failure to court a woman he loved. 'The Quangle Wangle's Hat' is about being lonely but being consoled by having all your fantastical creatures flock to you. That is, Lear used his fantastical nonsense to console himself, allowing him to step outside of his struggles and shrink them into unthreatening little comic pieces.

13. Tolkien image

As Tolkien writes, ‘The land of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and is filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both sorrow and joy as sharp as swords.’

Lear’s nonsense presents a fairy-world where joy predominates– it’s a world where animals talk, sing, dance and strut about in human clothing, trees double as armchairs, fish walk around on stilts, cats and birds fall in love, noses and beards grow to humungous sizes, bodies shrink, kitchen utensils ride away on horses, humans fly, and people rise up against society’s rules and comfortably act out their maddest instincts. It’s a wonderful world. But as in life, with joy comes sorrow.

‘Creative Fantasy’, Tolkien adds ‘is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a *recognition* of fact, but not a *slavery* to it.’ This is a helpful way of looking at Lear’s fantastical nonsense, I think. These funny little fantasy narratives often seem to recognise that life involves struggles, but that if we look at those struggles in a different way using the unbounded and releasing force of our imaginations, we are perhaps best placed to overcome them.

