



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!"

Five Fascinating Facts about the Limerick - Posted by interestingliterature

Fun facts about the limerick, the five-line comic poem whose origins are shrouded in mystery

1. Nobody knows for sure why limericks are named limericks. There have been numerous theories put forward for why the five-line verse known as the 'limerick' is so named, but none of them is conclusive. The name 'limerick' was first applied to the five-line form in the late nineteenth century, and one theory holds that comic verses once contained the line 'Will [or won't] you come (up) to Limerick?' But although the poems are almost certainly named after Limerick in Ireland, whether this is the true explanation of the name's origin remains unproven. One thing's for sure: the limerick, unlike the sonnet or other poetic forms, seems to be a peculiarly English form. It has even been described by Brander Matthews as perhaps the only original verse form in the whole of English literature. (Or is even this absolute fact? Below there is some cause for doubt...)

2. An early example of a poem which resembles a modern limerick was written by Queen Elizabeth I. In 'The Doubt of Future Foes', written in around 1571, Elizabeth (who reigned from 1558 until 1603) writes of Mary, Queen of Scots: 'The daughter of debate, that eke discord doth sowe, Shal reape no gaine where formor rule hath taught stil peace to growe'. The rhythm and basic form, if not the rhyme scheme, anticipate the modern limerick.

3. However, the germ of the modern limerick form goes back even further than the reign of Elizabeth I. For instance, this fourteenth-century poem comes pretty close to the limerick: 'The lion is wonderliche strong, & ful of wiles of wo; & whether he pleye other take his preye he can not do but slo.' However, the limerick form predates even the fourteenth century, as this Latin prayer by St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274 demonstrates):

Sit vitiorum meorum evacuatio
 Concupiscentiae et libidinis exterminatio,

Caritatis et patientiae,
Humilitatis et obedientiae,
Omniumque virtutum augmentatio.

So, is the limerick truly an English form? Well, its comic spirit appears to be – there aren't many gags in Doctor Angelicus' works. Another quality associated with many limericks is their scurrility: limericks are frequently 'dirty' and transgressive, addressing taboo issues.

4. There's even a limerick in Shakespeare's Othello. In William Shakespeare's great tragedy, written in around 1604, Iago sings a drinking song which he claims he heard in England: 'And let me the canakin clink, clink; And let me the canakin clink: A soldier's a man; A life's but a span; Why then let a soldier drink.' And from the Roxburgh Ballads, published in 1640, we have this poem, 'Mondayes Worke': 'Good morow, neighbour Gamble, / Come let you and I goe ramble; / Last night I was shot / Through the braines with a pot, / And now my stomacke doth wamble.' ('Wambly' is an old word for 'afflicted with nausea'.)

5. Edward Lear made the form famous in the nineteenth century. One of the best-known facts about limericks is that Edward Lear wrote them. In his 1846 Book of Nonsense, Edward Lear included dozens of limericks involving various characters who came from all over the globe. The first book of limericks had been published in 1821 by John Harris, The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women. These limericks end in the same way as Lear's, with the rhyme in the last line being the same as the line at the end of the first line, and suggest a possible origin for this kind of limerick, which Lear did so much to establish. Lear's limericks, being written for children, are often transgressive (like much good nonsense verse) but not 'dirty'. For some of Robert Conquest's outrageous limericks (a twentieth-century master of the form), see [here](#).

If you enjoy limericks, have a look also at our limericks telling the lives of Victorian writers. And on the theme of poetic forms, we've offered an interesting introduction to the sonnet [here](#).

