

# Nonsense: playing with words

**W**hat is nonsense? Foolish talk, meaningless words, or a specific part of literature, in which words seem to defy meaning, either because they are invented or misused. However, nonsense literature has its coherence, even though this may not be obvious. Two Victorians have brought the art of nonsense to its peak: Lewis Carroll has often been considered to be the initiator of nonsense literature and the best writer of nonsense prose. But some years before him, another British writer, Edward Lear, had been experimenting in the same field. He is best known for his nonsense verses and his limericks (collected in the *Book of Nonsense*).



## THE BOOK OF NONSENSE

Edward LEAR (1812-1888) published his *Book of Nonsense* in 1846. It is full of nonsense poetry. In 1862, he wrote the following to his friend Evelyn Baring:  
*Thrippsy pillivinx,  
Inky tinky pobblebockle  
abblesquabs? – Flosky! Beebul  
trimble flosky! – Okul  
scratchabibblebongibo, viddle  
squibble tog-a-tog, ferrymoyassity  
amsky flamsky ramsky damskey  
crocklefether squigg, Flinkywisty  
pomm, Slushypipp*  
Though the text is totally puzzling, it is not chaotic: it is laid out as a letter, with a beginning and an end;

the questions, exclamations and statements present themselves clearly and it is also properly punctuated. Yet, even though the 'words' look real and are apparently properly spelt, they have no meaning.

## LIMERICKS

Limericks are at least 250 years old. They were originally called 'nonsense verses'. Probably the first to be published was the children's nursery rhyme 'Hickere, Dickere Dock' in 1744. It is a classic limerick and consists of five lines, rhyming a a b b a. The limerick on the right exemplifies what nonsense verse is. Despite the perfectly grammatical use of the words, it doesn't mean much: as T.S. ELIOT once said, LEAR's limericks are 'a parody of sense'. There is but a shadow of a story, because, here, it is rhyme and rhythm which are the poet's real concern. Illustrations are quite important, an element CARROLL used as well with Tenniel's engravings.



There was an Old Man on the Border,  
Who lived in the utmost disorder;  
He danced with the Cat,  
And made Tea in his Hat,  
Which vexed all the folks on the Border.

### 'CURIUSER AND CURIUSER!'

In the Victorian era, entertaining children meant fashioning them according to a strict moral and religious code. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* overthrows all these traditional rules: the difference between good and bad has no value, and the usual hierarchical organization is swept away. Alice, a model Victorian girl, fond of rules, order and simplicity, is eager to make sense of all the things she sees. Yet she is confronted with a world of absolute authority, with arbitrariness, disorder and capriciousness. For example, she is constantly reminded of things she has learned, but always in a deformed way: she meets a Mock Turtle who explains what school consists of: 'Reeling and Writhing, of course, [...] and then the different branches of Arithmetic – Albition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision.' Victorian values are parodied and criticized. The unexpected logic of the characters is a real source of challenge for Alice and delight for the reader! Nonsense literature is not only a rebellion against the traditional use of words, but it is also revolutionary.

### PUNS AND PORTMANTEAU WORDS



The second aspect of nonsense literature is a revolution in language itself, by means of puns, neologisms and all kinds of play on words. Lewis CARROLL delighted in puns and all through the Alice books, he plays with language, much to Alice's confusion. These games often point out some inconsistency in the English language. This can be found in the way Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice the meaning of the poem 'Jabberwocky' in *Through the Looking Glass*. 'Jabberwocky' is really a word puzzle, using nonsense words instead of descriptive ones. Its purpose, if anything, is to be humorous. Here is the first stanza:

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

**What about nonsense now?** In France, Louis ARAGON and André BRETON wrote essays on CARROLL. NABOKOV translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian in 1932. James JOYCE used portmanteau words in *Finnegan's Wake*. More recently, The Monty Python brought nonsense to the British screen thanks to their five films. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* starts with King Arthur pretending he's riding a horse. He's having a nonsensical discussion about coconuts and swallows: 'Are you suggesting coconuts migrate?'. The Monty Python are also famous for their brand of comedy that was, at the very least, odd. The BBC-TV series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* between 1969 and 1983 was dubbed 'absurd', 'bizarre' and 'incomprehensible'!  
**On the other side of the Atlantic...** After a prestigious club said it would be honoured to count him among its members, Groucho MARX answered he would never be a member of a club willing to take in people like him! To the question 'Do you still chase women?' he also answered 'Yes, but only downhill' (he was 80 years old.) Woody ALLEN said it was impossible to get to know the universe because it was hard enough finding one's way around in Chinatown, New York.

