

LIMERICK, SCHLIMERICK, TAKE YOUR PICK

OR

**WAS IT THE ANAPEST (O)
THAT MADE ME SICK**

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**LIMERICK, SCHLIMERICK, TAKE YOUR PICK
OR WAS IT THE ANAPEST (O) THAT MADE ME SICK**

It's surprising how soon it comes round,
This biennial chore, I have found
It can take you so low
That you can't further go,
Like a goose, you'll be thoroughly downed!

Yet, it hardly seems worth all the worry,
All the effort, the last minute scurry,
Most Athenaeum fellows,
We have aged, we're so mellow,
We forget what is said in a hurry.

Now I'm devoted to old Athenaeum,
But our topics are oft times so gree-um,
That a sobering vision
Of arbitrary circumcision
Moves some skittish members to flee-um.

So I'm writing this paper for fun
I refuse to be under the gun
But, if rhyme after rhyme
Fails to be worth your time,
When I'm through, this crowd could be just one!

Webster defines the limerick as "a nonsense poem of 5 anapestic lines, often bawdy, usually with the rhyme scheme A A B B A, the first, second and fifth lines having three stresses, the third and fourth having two stresses, popularized by the 19th Century Illustrator and Poet, Edward Lear.

Webster even furnishes an example:

There was a young lady named Harris,
Whom nothing could ever embarrass
“Til the bath salts one day,
In the tub where she lay,
Turned out to be Plaster of Paris.

Though Mr. Webster recognizes that the limerick is “often bawdy”, there are virtual plethoras of these little verses exhibiting only prim and proper demeanor. Fortunately, you will not be subjected to any of those works this evening.

One of the most prolific limerick composers, Arthur Anon, writes:

The limerick packs laughs anatomical
Into space that is quite economical
But the goods ones I’ve seen,
Are so seldom clean
And the clean ones are so seldom comical.

Now it is not my wish, nor my mission, to drag the Athenaeum to any deeper depths than those to which some of you, (and I’ll name no names), have previously sunk! Another of the elite devotees of the form, Morris Bishop, has issued this warning:

The Limerick is furtive and mean
You must keep her in close quarantine
Or she sneaks to the slums,
And promptly becomes
Disorderly, drunk, and obscene!

This is excellent advice, and you may rest assured that I shall summon every ounce of restraint available to me in delivering a demure, non-offensive and politically correct presentation. However, I must make you aware of the results of my last medical exam, which confirmed a diagnosis of “acute restraint anemia”, untreatable by any known regimen. So, if at any time tonight, you detect a pallor masking my countenance, or a cold sweat soaking my brow, you’ll know my restraint cell count is down, and you may want to brace yourself.

In my maiden voyage upon the Athenaeum Sea over a quarter century past, Dr. Leslie Crane was one of several having comments. Many of you remember Dr. Crane, and for those who don’t, I will simply say that when he spoke, being a Presbyterian Minister, and a man of great intellect and repute, it was as if the Heavens had parted and the Almighty was holding forth.

That evening, the good doctor commented that I had illustrated the “use of bawdy language”! I was crushed! I certainly could think of “nary” one word of that paper which could have been judged bawdy. No concept, no quote, no idea, no double entendre, no nothing.

In rebuttal though, I dared not reply, thinking that even an alford plea could result in the death penalty. I simply stood down, as charged, ready to serve whatever sentence might be passed down.

It was not until several years later, all of which had been spent in “good behavior” worthy of early parole, that I came to terms with what proved to have been a phantom burden. I overheard Dr. Crane use the term, “His mind was strong, but his “bawdy” was weak”.

All my guilt was washed away in that one wonderful moment of enlightenment. Body language is okay for Athenaeum, unless you’re an exhibitionist, which, thank God for all of us, I am not. But, bawdy language was another matter, entirely.

So, after all these years of Victorian propriety, I can rest a bit easier, knowing that I am powerless in the relentless fight against restraint anemia. And, if I should veer sharply from the straight and narrow, or stumble on my Puritanical journey, I’ll bring in a medical excuse. I’ll also offer up a toast to times past, saying simply, “Dr. Crane, wherever you are, “This bawd’s for you.”

Back to matters at hand, I must be influenced by the sage verse of the late Don Marquis, a 20th century humorist and journalist, who penned:

It needn’t have ribaldry’s taint
Or strive to make everyone faint
There’s a type that’s demure
And perfectly pure
Though it helps quite a lot if it ain’t.

Much of the charm of the limerick lies in its seductive anatomy. Its first line sets the scene and introduces the main character. The second line rhymes with the first, making a couplet. It may introduce a second character and/or open the action

which will later precipitate a crisis.

The third and fourth lines are shortened, to intensify the suspense, plus they introduce a new rhyme, preferably one which has “startle” quality, forming a second couplet.

Finally, the fifth line returns to the rhyme scheme of lines one and two, and delivers the climax (oops, sorry!) turning point, and revelation or outcome. There are few poetical forms that can boast of the limerick’s perfection. Its concise brevity and lilting meter make it a prime candidate for memorization. I would bet that even each of us in this weak-minded bunch could dredge up at least one, maybe two, if we tried.

A textbook example might be:

As Titian was mixing rose madder,
His model reclined on a ladder
Her position to Titian
Suggested coition
So he leapt up the ladder and had’er.

Historically, the limerick has taken severe abuse through the efforts of both professional writers and amateur neophytes to alter it rhythmically, in structural length, and/or in rhyme scheme. This lily-gilding does not work, and woe be unto him who attempts such sacrilege.

To wit:

The limerick, peculiar to English
Is a verse form that’s hard to extinguish
Why once Congress in session

Decreed its suppression
But people got around it by writing
the last line without any rhyme or meter.

Or:

There was a fat lady from Eye
Who felt she was likely to die
But for fear that once dead
She would not be well-fed
She gulped down a pig, a cow, a sheep, twelve rolls, a seven layer
cake, four cups of coffee and a green apple pie!

Stick to the formula, gentlemen. If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it. Also, remember that English is the mother tongue, and the limerick is an Anglo-American form of verse, perhaps the only original verse form of the English language. Don't try to translate, since most languages seem to lack the ambiguity of our English.

There was a young fellow named Hall
Who fell in the spring in the fall
'Twould have been a sad thing
Had he died in the spring
But he didn't – he died in the fall.

A German translator published this one in English, plus German translations, along with learned commentary in Germanic prose. Quite confusing because the word "Spring" was given as both "Frujahr" (the season) and "Quelle" (a flow of water). "Fall" was rendered as both "Herbst" (the season) and "Wasserfall" (waterfall). The inherent problems are apparent.

One of the best known limerick sequences was that touched off by one published in the *Princeton Tiger* (with apologies to Rob Harper) in the early 20th Century.

There was an old man of Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket
But his daughter, named Nan
Ran away with a man
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

This little ditty spawned a rush of sequels from myriad sources, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Press*:

Pa followed the pair to Pawtucket
The man and the girl with the bucket
And he said to the man
You're sure welcome to Nan
But as for the bucket, Pawtucket.

Then the pair followed Pa to Manhasset
Where he still held the cash as an asset
And Nan and the man
Stole the money and ran
And, as for the asset, Manhasset!

The popularity of sequels written in a competitive manner may well been the impetus of the contests conducted by newspapers and other periodicals, and by manufacturers to promote their products. Usually, the first four lines were given, and the public was invited to write the tag line.

Evidence of this popularity can be shown in the case of newspaper contests. In the second half of 1907 in England, it was customary to require each competitor to

forward with each entry a postal order for sixpence. During that same period, the sales of sixpenny postal orders increased from a norm of 700,000 – 800,000, to a staggering 11,400,000, a fourteen fold increase.

These contests migrated to the United States, becoming plentiful enough to occasion the publishing of a handbook entitled “How To Write Prize Winning Limericks” in 1930. They were not uncommon even as late as the 1950’s, but have waned greatly as creeping illiteracy has taken its toll.

Finally, while the best known limerick writers are Anon., Idem., Ibid., and Trad., nearly all famous writers, of the past two centuries, at least, have, at one time or another, tried their hands at this enchanting art form.

Lewis Carroll, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles G. Leland, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bertrand Russell, Nipsy Russell, TS. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Heywood Broun, even Alben Barkley, all have recorded their verses for posterity.

Ogden Nash wrote:

There was a young girl of old Natchez
Whose garments were always in patchez
When comment arose
On the state of her clothes
She drawled, “When I itches, I scratchez.

Rudyard Kipling added:

There once was a boy of Quebec
Who was buried in snow to his neck
When asked, “Are you frizz?”
He replied, “Yes I lzzz!”
But we don’t call this cold in Quebec.

Woodrow Wilson was so fond of quoting this one that many think he wrote it:

As a beauty, I'm not a great star,
There are others more handsome by far,
But my face, I don't mind it,
Because I'm behind it,
Tis the folks in the front that I jar.

Apparently, though, Wilson did write this little gem.

I sat next to the duchess at tea,
It was just as I feared it would be
Her rumblings abdominal
Were truly phenomenal
And everyone thought it was me.

Eugene Field outdid himself with this auditory puzzler:

Now what in the world shall we dioux
With the bloody and murderous Sioux
Who some time ago
Took up arrow and bow
And raised such a hellabelioux?

And Mark Twain's only recorded limerick takes my cake as the best ever written, in abbreviated, full-length version. Sounds as if that would be mutually exclusive, but consider this.

A man hired by John Smith & Co.
Loudly declared he would tho.
Man that he saw
Dumping dirt near his store
So the drivers, therefore, didn't do.

You must pardon me, but I fear that I feel an attack of anemia surging through my veins. Years ago, I saw a cartoon picturing an organ grinder with his monkey, plying his trade on a busy, downtown street. The caption, attributed to the monkey as he manned the cup and looked wistfully at his master, said, "Ya know, I think I could do that!"

Well, I think I can do this limerick thing. Not being creative or original I will limit my efforts to the rehabilitation of some old puns and humorous stories which may have lost some of their freshness through age and exposure.

Some in one single verse, others, in the interest of clarity, in multiple verse, but all in true form and meter, maybe! If your fancy is tickled, feel free to respond with raucous laughter! If not, please sit courteously and quietly. I'll conclude as soon as this anemia attack subsides.

There once was a lady named Flatt
Who birthed triplets, Matt, Nat and Tat
She had hoped to breast feed
So they'd grow like a weed
But, alas, there was no tit for Tat.

Fine furniture sales was his callin',
But his belly, to him, was most gallin',
He had, if you please,
Occupational disease!
His chest in his drawers had fallen!

A constipated engineer named Pool
Suffered bloat, but was nobody's fool,
To feel better, he guessed
He's do what he did best,
So he worked it all out with his slide rule!

A coin counterfeiter named Tackett
Found his coinage skills just didn't hack it,
On his sentencing date,
He did honestly state,
"My downfall was a "bad mintin' racket"."

A millionaire's offspring named Ware,
Was steamrollered to death on the square
His obituary was run
By the town's "Daily Sun"
Eulogizing the Ware's compressed heir!

A young baseball player named Gunn
Topped a grounder and when it was done,
An old pig scaled the wall
And swallowed the ball,
Twas an "inside the pork" home run!!

An old showboat captain named Potters,
Fathered nine sons and eight lovely daughters.
They all took the stage
At their coming of age,
He sure bred his cast on the waters!

An industrious old barber from Austin,
Worked excessive long hours, and it cost him,
While clip-clipping away
In his little shop one day
He keeled over! The cause? "Shear Exhaustion".

In your travels, you'll learn that a duffle
Is a bag where you pack all your stuffle,
Doubly handy, to-wit
For if on top you sit
It will serve as a flatulence muffle.

An old trapeze artist named Mack
Keeps performing with nerves that are wracked,
He stays so uptight
Because night after night
He catches his wife in the act!

A prim Quaker lady named Keightly
Was cut off in traffic quite tightly,
She said "Don't want to preach
But tonight when thou reach
Thy kennel, may thy mother bite thee!

Now, some stories simply are too complicated and detailed to allow the economical space use previously mentioned. Two verses are required for full bloom development. We call these bi-limericks, the novelettes of the craft. Please hold your laughter until the second verse.

There once was a lady named Mears,
Who'd not missed Sabbath worship in years
One Sunday she woke
With all her clocks broke
Not knowing the time brought her tears.

So she dressed, in the mirror ne'er look-ed,
And disheveled, to Church she then took it.
One lone lad stood about,
So she asked, "Is Mass out?"
He said, "No, but your hat's a bit crooked".

There once was a diner named Young,
Who ordered a sandwich of tongue,
Waitress said, "Sir, that's lame,
To eat something which came
From a cow's mouth, I'd sooner be hung!"

So, not wishing the question to beg,
He said, "You're not just pulling my leg!
Since you think it's best
You may change my request,
I'll be having a couple of eggs.

There once was a lady named Hall
Who was asked to a masquerade ball
From the start, t'was her plan
To attract every man!
As the Belle of the ball she'd stand tall!

Though she had stylish outfits untold,
Her wardrobe fell short of her goal
For no Costumes were there,
So she stripped herself bare,
And backed in, as a Parkerhouse Roll!

Two friends, at the local asylum
Were outside, and the skies did beguile 'em
When a bird from on high
Dropped a load in one's eye,
It was more than sufficient to rile 'em.

The offended one's friend said, "Don't fret"
"I'll make haste and a tissue I'll get!"
But his pal said "Don't mind,
When you come back you'll find
That old bird will be long gone, I'll bet!"

An old florist whose name I won't mention,
Took a trip to the Floral Convention
He had planned to compete
With his blossoms so sweet,
But strong drink captured all his attention!

In a drunken fit, born of derangement,
From his clothing took total estrangement,
He then "streaked" the show floor
And, ere hitting the door,
Won first prize for the best dried arrangement.

A scientific researcher named Babbitt
Thought he'd publish a book on sex habits
Of young femmes and their beaus,
Twenty questions he'd pose,
He was sure that the public would grab it!

So, a survey of females he took
Though one lass his confidence shook
When this question came next,
"Do you smoke after sex?"
She replied, "I don't know, never looked!"

And finally, the intricacies of some epic tales are so finely woven that even two, of three verses are insufficient to properly tell the story. We call these, quadra limericks, the novels or sagas of limerickety. An example would be:

There once was a man from Van Nuys,
Who, on Monday, had two dark black eyes,
He was asked to explain
Who inflicted this pain
When reporting to work with they guys!

He explained that in Church, on the Lord's day
He sat back of a large, broad-beamed "Laday"
When they stood up to sing
He could see her skirt cling
In the cleft twixt her buns, t'was a mayday.

In good faith he tugged at her bodice,
Extracting said skirt, not immodest.
Yet she turned, dropped her book,
And unleashed a right hook
His left eye her "pupilla non gratis."

Said his friends, your tale is still lackin
How the other eye came by its whackin,
He said, "Well, she'd decreed
The skirt shouldn't be freed,
When she next stood, just crammed it back in.

It is said that all good things must end,
And I fear all my "cotton is ginned",
I have now "punched my chad",
Be it good, be it bad,
And there's no more that lies round the bend.

So, I'll say of this piece on the limerick,
Athenaeum may ne'er have a slimmer pick
If you were searching for light
To illumine this night,
You'd best go back home and trim a wick.

And, have a good rhyme when you get there.