Activity 2 - Edward Lear’s Animals

Edward Lear’s poetry is full of animal creatures. A daddy-long-legs and a fly go on a voyage, an owl marries a pussycat, a sparrow husband and wife buy a beautiful new wardrobe from London, and numerous animal creatures dance in and out of the limericks, often with an elegant human partner. Birds make a particularly frequent appearance in Lear’s poetry, a fact which makes sense when we consider that his early career was spent as a draughtsman of birds. Take a look here: https://www.zsl.org/blogs/artefact-of-the-month/edward-lears-parrots. However, Lear’s affinity with birds, real and poetic, acquires a new significance in the context of debates in the Victorian period which challenge the relationship between human and animal life. This section will begin to sketch a biographical approach to Lear’s poetry by assessing his attachment to non-human life in relation to developments within Victorian science, as well as in relation to his conception of himself as oddity or outsider.

Lear was not from a wealthy family, so when he was fifteen he set off to make a living for himself, doing, in his words ‘uncommon queer shop-sketches—selling them for prices varying from ninepence to four shillings’ (Noakes, 1968: 29). He picked up on a fashion for expensive books about exotic animals, many of them published by sailors and naturalists on their return from studying exotic animal life. Lear soon began working for one of these naturalists and by the time he was eighteen had decided to make a book of his own focusing on that fashionable and exotic creature, the parrot.¹ He soon found himself in high demand, illustrating a book based on one of Darwin’s early voyages on the H.M.S. Beagle, and eventually ended up living, for several years, with Lord Stanley, an aristocrat who had built up a famous private menagerie of birds. It was here that Lear began writing his nonsense, as his play with the Stanley children provided him with a relief from what he called ‘the uniform apathetic tone assumed by lofty society’ which ‘irks me dreadfully’ (Noakes, 1968: 45).

As an outsider in a world of wealthy patrons, Lear must have felt a little like one of the animals in the menagerie. I long for nothing, he wrote, ‘half so much as to giggle heartily and to hop on one leg down the great gallery—but I dare not’ (Noakes, 1968: 45). Indeed, the relationship between animal and human society in Lear’s writing is often highly muddled. High society is reduced to life among the birds—the oversized bonnet of the Young Lady from Dorking, for instance, reduces this eminent person to a wild and plumed spectacle: http://www.edward-lear.com/Dorking.htm. The beard of another old man is converted into a kind of pleasure ground for its beaky inhabitants. Two owls sit politely side by side, looking vastly more distinguished than their wild-looking host: http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/BoN/bon010.html.

The rhythmic form of the limerick draws it close to being a kind of lyric or song. Certainly, the limerick characters often seem to be involved in dances with one another. Take a look at these dancing pairs:

(Lear, 22).

A Young Lady of Bute (1846)
An Old Man of Whitehaven (1846)

The animal bodies are as expressive as the human—each of the pigs is captivated by the Young Lady and her music, yet exhibits quite a different look on his face. The pig on the left, in fact, looks as though he is hearing an altogether sadder tune. The Old Man and his raven are so in tune that the former seems on the way to being transformed into one, holding his coat tails out like wings. The Young Lady, too, cultivates a pig-like look in the form of her hat, which droops over like a sow’s ear. These might seem like random details, but they also suggest the ways that Lear is flirting with new forms of animal-human relationship.

In the Bible, as all good Victorians would have known, God gave man power over the plants and animals of the earth: ‘And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply…and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and every living thing that moves on earth” (Genesis 2:15). Yet Lear was always a man uncomfortable with power relationships. While he spent most of his life cultivating friendships with grandees and aristocrats— and depended on them for money all his adult life— Lear’s desire to ‘hop on one leg’ through the gallery is characteristic of his desire to playfully resist these structures.

Lear was opposed the doctrine of Original Sin, and to established ideas of guilt and punishment in general. His own spiritual beliefs are informed by a sense of equality between man and beast. As one critic observes, in Lear’s poetry animals tend to remind human
characters ‘of their concrete physicality and their need for pleasure’. The idea of a physicality that is shared between animals and humans connects Lear to those revolutions taking place in the study of anatomy, in particular from the 1830s onwards. The writing of Richard Owen and Charles Darwin was increasingly suggesting to people how closely related the limbs of different animals were. Both writers emphasise how closely all animals resemble one another, and flag up similarities between birds, fish, reptiles and human bodies, and the way these bodies change and adapt over time.

The idea of a kinship between man and animal is something we are used to. However, for the Victorians, such ideas came as a shock, downgrading man into beast in the hierarchy of creation. Lear’s work runs with the idea that man and animal dance to the same tune, and inhabit a similar world of playfulness and physical energy. While nonsense poems shy away from engaging directly with science, we can read a lot into poems such as this, where man seems to become fish by simply purchasing a new coat:

There was an old person of Brill,
Who purchased a shift with a frill;
But they said, ‘Don’t you wish, you may’nt look like a fish,
You obsequious old person of Brill?’

(Lear, 162)

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If Lear felt at home with the animals, and with the animal qualities of human beings, he also seems to identify with their homelessness or their status as creatures as uncomfortably domesticated as himself. Human figures often provide a home for animals of different kinds, in Lear’s poems, as in the case of the bearded old man above. In other limericks, they help human characters to escape, however fleeting or threatened with failure the escape might be. See for instance the old person of Rye:

There was an old person of Rye,  
Who went up to town on a fly;  
But they said, ‘If you cough, you are safe to fall off!  
You abstemious old person of Rye!’
Or the peaceful looking old man of Dunluce:

There was an old man of Dunluce,
Who went out to sea on a goose:
When he’d gone out a mile, he observ’d with a smile,
‘It is time to return to Dunluce.’

(Lear, 178).

Lear’s lifelong status as unmarried, and as a travelling artist, made him a rather homeless figure. However, if his characters find a sort of consolation in the shape of their animal companions, they also keep one foot in the human world. The person of Rye finds that his escape is not assured, or that he is ‘safe’ to fall off the fly, whatever this means. The man of Dunluce, on the other hand, while looking dreamily into the eyes of his goose, still feels compelled to return home. A few last questions, then. Read these limericks closely again, and think about why an escape into the animal world might be desirable. Since Lear, as a bachelor, did not ‘go forth and multiply’ as Genesis demands, perhaps life as part of an animal couple seemed like a happy nonsense alternative? Yet these poems also betray
unease about the possibility, too. What kind of mixed messages can you find within each poem?

Similarly, like the captive birds he drew in his early years of employment, Lear spent most of his adult life depending on wealthier friends for a living. Can we draw a similarity between the limerick animals, caught in a performance, and Lear’s own instinct to perform for others? Lear creates a world in which animal and human life are closely coupled. We might see such a world as an alternative Genesis, in which new kinds of harmonious relationship are being suggested. However, this alternative Garden of Eden also seems to be partly a joke at the expense of religion, taking off from new scientific discoveries which seem to break down the boundaries between man and beast.

A few further questions:

- You can find all of the limericks in Lear’s first *A Book of Nonsense* (1860) online here. [http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/BoN/bon010.html](http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/BoN/bon010.html). Notice how many of Lear’s figures have something animal-like about them, either because of their appetites, like the Old Person who eats rabbits in limerick 33, or because we have been made aware of the strangeness, the physicality of their bodies. Look at the Old Man of Quebec in limerick 38. One thing that comic texts often do is to make us aware of our own bodies, and particularly the way these bodies resemble either inanimate objects (a stick, a machine, or overcoat) or other creatures (a bird, or bat). How have the animals in these poems been constructed to make us reconsider the peculiarity of the human body, and/or human society?

- The essay G.K. Chesterton wrote a defence of nonsense— if you’re interested, you can find it here. [http://www.gkc.org.uk/gkc/books/The_Defendant.html#A_DEFENCE_OF_NONSENSE](http://www.gkc.org.uk/gkc/books/The_Defendant.html#A_DEFENCE_OF_NONSENSE) In it he suggests that nonsense is a kind of alternative to religion in the sense that it provides ‘wonder’ in the same way as religions do. In fact, nonsense might remind us of what religion has forgotten: that ‘a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible’. What do you make of this idea?
Like the animals, many of the limerick people seek a kind of perch or retreat. How many such people can you spot? Now look at these three unpublished limericks. http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/BoN/abon.html. To climb onto a platform is both an escape and a kind of performance. Can the link between these behaviours tell us anything about Lear’s own writing? Is nonsense an escape or a mode of attention-seeking?