Let me start with a confession.

My main aim in writing this essay is to pass on misery. The particular brand of misery I want to pass on is something that I've been suffering for a few years now, and to be frank, I think it's about time I bowed to the baser demands of human nature and spread it around a little.

There are certain phenomena in life which can only be described as *insidious*. When we first meet them, they assume an air of harmless innocence, masquerading as just another one of life's simple pleasures. Yet somehow they catch our attention and begin, subtly, to seduce us. "Come on," they wheedle in our mind's ear. "Come on… try me… just the once… Hey, I could be *fun*."

Lurking among the most dangerous of these phenomena is the common limerick. This alluring little specimen, with its five short lines and thirty-four (ish) syllables, has been entrapping and devouring gullible victims for far longer than you might imagine.

The question of exactly *how* long is an interesting one. Examples of early proto-limerick forms have been identified in the writings of such notaries as Homer and Shakespeare, though, to be honest, the evidence of deliberate limerick-writing is so tenuous that the only conclusion we can reliably draw is that some literary analysts have far too much time on their hands. Another suggestion, only fractionally more plausible, is that St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) set out to compose a limerick when he wrote in his *Breviary*:

> **Sit vitiorum meorum evacuato**
> **Concupiscentiae et libidinis exterminatio,**
> **Caritatis et patientiae**
> **Humilitatis et obedientiae**
> **Omniumque virtutum augmentati.**

Is this a genuine, intentional limerick? My instinct is to say no. Aquinas might have been a thirteenth-century Catholic philosopher, a theologian and eventually a saint, but he wasn't exactly famed for his light-hearted approach to life, and I tend to think he wasn't a closet bard. Also, it doesn't rhyme. Or scan.

Still, while his motives may have been obscure and his scansion dreadful, the fact remains: whether through fateful accident or misguided design, the great-grandaddy of the modern limerick was alive in 1200 and living in Italy.

Fast forward another four hundred years or so to witness the first recorded example of a *genuine* limerick. *Tom O'Bedlam* is an anonymous folk ditty whose 25 verses describe what goes on in the mind of one resident at an infamous seventeenth-century London mental asylum:

> **Of thirty years have I**
> **Twice twenty been enragèd**
> **And of forty been three times fifteen**
> **In durance soundly cagèd**
>
> **On the lordly lofts of Bedlam**
> **With stubble soft and dainty,**
> **Brave bracelets strong, sweet whips, ding-dong,**
> **With wholesome hunger plenty.**

I won't quote the rest; we never find out just what it was that drove Tom to the brink of insanity, but if you've ever tried writing a coherent 25-verse narrative entirely in limerick form, you'll be in an excellent position to hazard a guess.

Pretenders and prophets came and went, but it wasn't until the mighty Edward Lear burst onto the scene that the limerick community finally found its messiah. Having frittered away his youthful years in such empty pursuits as painting, drawing and offending the Queen, he finally found his vocation with *The History Of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women* (1821). In 1845 he published his *Book Of Nonsense*, and thirty years later *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, Etc.*. Both works overflowed with delightfully silly poems:

> **There was an Old Person of Rhodes,**
> **Who strongly objected to toads;**
> **He paid several cousins to catch them by dozens,**
> **That futile Old Person of Rhodes.**

Of course, these so-called 'learics' weren't quite the sleek, graceful beasts that we know today. For a start, they had precious little narrative content, tending towards nonsense rather than wit (the clue's in the title). And they were almost always designed so that the last line ended with the same word or phrase as the first, a device that rather lamely deprives the poem of the punchline expected by the modern ear.

Despite these flaws, the fact remains that since Lear stuck his oar in, the world has never been able to shake off the grasp of the limerick, and the form has squirmed its way into virtually every field of human activity. The modern limericist might still be most comfortable in domains silly or obscene, but the canon also ranges over such diverse subject matters as science, philosophy, language, biography and even fine art.

After all, it's long been accepted that encoding a piece of information – *any* information – in rhythmic verse is a brilliant way to make it memorable. It's a technique that's been in use at least since the times of the great oral epics. And the challenge has proved irresistible to countless academics. One of my favourites is this delightful anonymous composition from the world of biology:

An insect was heard to complain,
"A chemist has poisoned my brain!"
The cause of his sorrow
Was paradichloro-
diphenyltrichloroethane.

See what I mean? Not only is that as perfectly-formed a stanza as ever walked this earth, it has the three secondary virtues of wit, memorability, and impeccable scientific accuracy. It is also pleasingly cliquey. To this end, a biochemist friend of mine suggested that it would be better to write the last three lines as **The cause of his sorrow was $C^{14}H^{9}Cl^{5}$**, thereby increasing its didactic value and reducing its accessibility even further.

Of course, if limericks were nothing more than innocent aîdes-memoires, I wouldn't be writing this essay. Tragically, they are not, and equally tragically, I am.

Limericks, and I say this in all seriousness, are dangerously addictive. Just look at what happened to poor old Mr Lear: by the time he met his unfortunate end in 1888, he'd created 212 of the little monsters and was clearly in the grip of full-blown dependency. (And to think they said it was bronchitis.) A quick flick through the entries to any recent poetry competition in the English language shows that Eddie wasn't the only one.

So all-pervading is the limerick's influence that some otherwise respectable writers go far out of their way to deny that their compositional habits bring them any suffering at all. Witness Lesslie Newbigin, professional theologian by day, amateur limericist by night:

> I am normally a good sleeper. When occasionally, sleep evades me, I concoct limericks. … There is no hurry. If it refuses to come out right, there is always another night; if it does 'click' one drops off to sleep. Something accomplished, something done has earned a night's repose. It is a tranquillizer with positively no harmful side-effects.

"If it refuses to come out right, there is always another night." Hah. In case anyone is left in genuine doubt about the hollowly ironic tone of this remark, observe that it occurs in the preface to a book singularly devoted to charting the progress of St Paul on his evangelistic journey around the Aegean... a book written entirely in – you've guessed it – the common limerick. Now, is Mr Newbigin honestly telling us that he never woke up in a cold sweat with his brain racing, desperately to try to find a rhyme 'Adramyttium'?[1] Pull the other one.

I'm a good sleeper too, but notably less so since I took my first few tentative steps into the limerick's den of sorrows. For me, nailing a stubborn rhyme has become a severe obsession. It pains me to think of how many potentially beautiful friendships have been ruined because the only line of conversation I can come up with is "Can you think of a decent rhyme for 'fossil'?". (Bugger. It's just come to me now: 'Apostle'. I guess I have St Paul to thank for that one.)

I have a feeling the next stage of this debilitating disorder will be utter immobility. Already, every potential journey beyond the frontiers of my own home must be carefully planned so as to minimise the risk of seeing

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[1] Oh, go on, if you insist:

> The people of wet Adramyttium
> Have raincoats, galoshes, and pretty um-
> Brellas, and thus
> They don't make a fuss
> When it rains, and there's no cause to pity 'em.

an unfamiliar place-name on a road sign and being plunged into one of my silently obsessive frames of mind, the kind that last for minutes, days or weeks at a time.

Anyway, the main part of this essay, dear reader, has but one objective: to drag you down with me into the depths of compulsive, pernickety and incessant limericking. You'll laugh; you'll cry; rather more of one than the other, I suspect. And, above all, you'll learn one of the world's most diligently avoided skills: the art of flattening any poetic sentiment, no matter how noble, into a paragon of spurious banality. Study hard, practise hard, and eventually you too could be the lord of the limerick. It is, despite appearances, very occasionally worth it.

Rhyme

It almost goes without saying that the heart of a good limerick is a good rhyme. Your limerick's first line ends with a key word – usually a place or person, the subject of the poem. Now you need two good rhymes for that subject, for the end of lines 2 and 5.

Easy? Sometimes. If your first line is:

> **There once was a mollusc called Fred**

…then the rest of the poem is, if you'll pardon the expression, your oyster. More interesting subjects demand a little more care and attention:

> **The Romans in old Eboracum**

Good luck.

What's interesting is that, if you ask a random English speaker to define what counts as a rhyme, they'll probably come out with something like "it's two words which sound the same". This kind of vague notion is all very well for Joe Public, but we obsessive limericists are going to need a far more precise definition. The first thing to do is to stamp out a couple of widespread delusions:

> *Delusion 1: any two words which end the same way must automatically rhyme.* If this were true, the world of limericks would indeed be a happy place to inhabit. Unfortunately, it isn't. **Clinton** and **Houston** both end in **-ton**, but if you think they rhyme, I'm afraid you've got a long way to go.
>
> *Delusion 2: for a perfect rhyme, you've got to match up every single syllable.* If this was true, nary an interesting limerick would ever be composed. Thankfully, it isn't and they are.

So what *does* count as a rhyme? Well, the bad news is that the answer to that question is quite complicated. But the good news is that the complexity isn't anything to worry about, because most native English speakers have a natural grasp of it anyway.

Anyway, here's the answer in all its glory:

The First Rule of Limerick Writing: Rhyme

Two words or phrases rhyme perfectly only if…

> **the last *stressed* syllable in each word or phrase is the same, except for different initial consonants; *and*…**
>
> **all the subsequent *unstressed* syllables in each word or phrase (if there are any) are identical.**

By way of illustration, consider **butter**. The word has two syllables, and the stress falls on the first: ***but*-ter**. So good rhymes include ***mut*-ter**, ***shut*-ter** and ***clut*-ter** – where the stressed syllable is the same except for its initial consonant(s), and the following unstressed syllable is identical. Bad rhymes include **better** or **hunter** (because the stressed syllables aren't similar enough), and **button** or **cutting** (because the unstressed syllables aren't identical).

The First Rule sounds complicated, but all it does really is to express in a flowery way what most of us instinctively understand anyway. After all, few of us have to think very hard to work out whether **butter** rhymes with **nutter** or **batter**. See? Dead easy.

One very happy consequence of the First Rule is that it opens the door to long words and phrases without causing too many headaches. Consider, for instance, **Castle Howard**, a singularly dull stately home in North Yorkshire. It's got four syllables, and at first glance, it looks like a poet's nightmare as well as a tourist's. But we enlightened souls can quickly see that the only important bits are **How-** (the last stressed syllable) and **-ard** (the following unstressed one). So, once we've found a rhyme for **Howard**, our work's done. We couldn't care less about the **Castle** part, which occurs *before* the last stressed syllable and is therefore completely irrelevant. Witness:

A vicar from near Castle Howard
Was frequently branded a coward.

Of course, the most common stumbling-blocks for the amateur limerick writer are not nice tame places like **Hull** or **Bath**, but the **Doncaster**s and **Stevenage**s of this world – stubborn, problematic and frankly uncooperative. Then there are the even more ferocious foreign beasts – **Constantinople**, **Waukesha** – which are all too happy to chew up and spit out whatever friendly syllables we tentatively toss in their direction.

The main problem is that many place names, especially English ones, have a habit of putting the stress on the first syllable, then lining up two or three unstressed syllables immediately afterwards. This makes them about as awkward to rhyme as anything ever could be, frankly. What chance have we got of finding a word to rhyme with **Battersea** (***Bat*-ter-sea**) simply by changing the first consonant, as the First Rule dictates? (**Mattersea**? **Plattersea**?)

Fortunately, at this point, the Second Rule comes to the rescue. Here it is:

The Second Rule of Limerick Writing: Cheat

This is a cast-iron rule. Really.

Cheating in limericks is not only tolerated, it's practically *expected*. An audacious and gutsy display of verbal underhandedness is both inspiring and humbling. Never hesitate. Just reach into your limericist's toolbox and produce one of the four Magic Tools of Cheating.

Your whirlwind tour of these four wondrous devices begins… now.

Can't find a single word to match your subject? It doesn't matter. Just jam a few words together and nobody will notice the difference. This classic method, the **Multi-Word Rhyme**, is so common it hardly counts as cheating any more:

I met an old wrestler from Battersea,
And no other man was as fat as he.

Then there's the limericist's constant companion, the **Judicious Apostrophe**:

There was an old lady of Acomb
Who tried to cook eggs, but not break 'em.

With the aid of this little scamp, **them** becomes **'em** (usually pronounced with what linguists call a 'schwa', a word that itself has an ironically long 'ah' sound); **her** becomes **'er** (almost like 'uh'); **he** becomes **'e**; and **will** becomes **'ll**:

There was a newsagent from Strensall
Who swallowed a small HB pencil.
His neighbour said, "Sid,
"Why not swallow a quid?
"If that doesn't shift it, ten pence'll!"

(By the way, a note to the pedantic: that last line violates the First Rule because **pencil** and **pence'll** don't strictly rhyme; they don't different initial consonants. If this kind of disrespect annoys you, invent an appropriately deferential alternative.)

Next up is the **Cross-Line Rhyme**, where a word or phrase is interrupted in an awkward place in order to force a rhyme that wouldn't otherwise work:

A dinosaur expert from Battersea
Loved archaeological matters. He
Advised, "Do not jostle
"When digging a fossil;
"If jolted too hard, then it shatters, see?"

That particular technique can be a bit too overpowering for some more conservative palates. Ask yourself: if you were reading that second line out loud, where would you pause? Would you obey the metre and take a breath after 'He', to force a rhyme? Or would you go with the flow of the prose and stop after 'matters', then charge on across the line break? Either way, your listeners have to make a certain amount of conscious

mental effort to correct for the cheating. Then again, maybe that's a healthy thing for listeners to be doing anyway, to reduce the risk that their brains might have atrophied in self-defence before the end of line 5.

And besides, if you thought *that* was bad, you ain't seen nothing yet. My personal favourite method of cheating is the **Self-Conscious Cheat**, which is the poetic equivalent of throwing one's hands up in the air and declaring, "I can't do it! So sue me!". The idea is to use the limerick itself to admit your failure in such a way as to raise a post-modern chuckle in itself:

> **There once was a fellow from Trinidad**
> **Whose rhyming in poems was very bad.**

See what I mean? It doesn't work at all, but that's the point: it *knows* it doesn't work, and that's why it's funny. Or, as we say in limerick land, "funny".

You can also combine the Self-Conscious Cheat with a Multi-Word Rhyme or a Cross-Line Rhyme to make an overly laboured construction seem more palatable. If you want to, you can even make it the whole point of the poem — a kind of meta-conscious cheat:

> **There once was a fellow from Xiangling**
> **Whose greatest delight was in mangling**
> **Poems. He would drop**
> **Words between lines and lop**
> **Their ends off, and leave readers dang**

If I ever get round to making a collection of my favourite limericks before I move away from my home city (or before they lock me up, whichever is the sooner), I intend to finish with this one:

> **There once was a poet from York**
> **Who found it increasingly awk-**
> **Ward to write compositions**
> **That upheld traditions**
> **Of rhyming and scanning, so sometimes he gave up.**

So there.