

# **British Literature, Book 2**

## Lesson 21 Victorian Humor

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# Lesson 21

## Victorian Humor

### Objectives

- To explore wordplay through the works of Lear, Carroll, and Gilbert
- To recognize forms of limericks, portmanteau words, puns, and humorous lyrics

### Notes to the Teacher

According to some literary scholars, Queen Victoria's kingdom turned into "topsy-turvydom" when the nonsense writing of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear came into vogue. In fact, authors from no other generation have been able to match the Victorians in this specialty.

Edward Lear (1812–1888) was a landscape painter and an illustrator of nature and travel books. He was skilled enough to be invited to give drawing lessons to Queen Victoria. However, his sideline of writing nonsense rhymes brought him lasting fame. He popularized the verse form known as the limerick. His sense of humor and love of monkeying with words led him to combine original sketches with puns and parodies to explicate such diverse things as the alphabet, botany, and cooking recipes.

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was a mathematics teacher at Oxford. He, too, had sidelines of nonsense writing and amateur portrait photography. Although he was good at photography, his logical but whimsical approach to language brought him fame with the books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*

William Schwenck (W. S.) Gilbert was born in London in 1836, and educated at London University. His experiences as an officer in the Gordon Highlanders, as a government clerk, and as a practicing lawyer in London provided him with satiric material found in his later light (comic) operas. These operas were written in collaboration with the musical composer Arthur Sullivan. Some of the most notable were *Trial by Jury* (1875), *H. M. S. Pinafore* (1878), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), *Lolanthe* (1882), and *The Mikado* (1885). Gilbert also

wrote a selection of satiric verse collected in two volumes and called the *Bab Ballads*. He was knighted in 1907.

### Procedure

1. Tell students that you are going to present some word games devised by a famous Victorian writer. Put the following sentence on the board:

Cover *eye* with *lid*.

Explain that they have to transform the word *eye* to the word *lid* in three steps. In each step, one letter may be changed. If they can't get the process started, help them with this first one (*eye*, *dye*, *die*, *did*, *lid*).

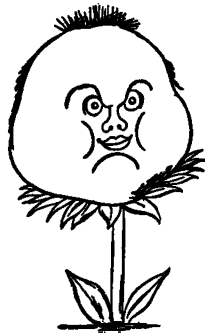
Try these examples:

- a. Drive a *pig* into a *sty* in four steps (*pig*, *wig*, *wag*, *way*, *say*, *sty*).
- b. Make *wheat* into *bread* in six steps (*wheat*, *cheat*, *cheap*, *cheep*, *creep*, *creed*, *breed*, *bread*).

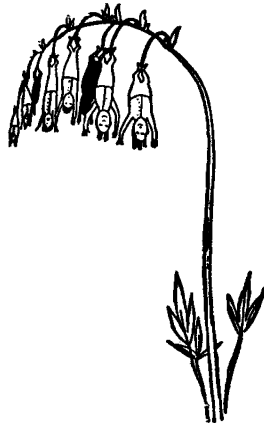
For more examples, see "Doublets, A Word Puzzle" in *Diversions and Digressions of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, Dover Publishing, Inc., 1961.

2. Explain that these word games were devised by the Victorian writer Lewis Carroll for a book published in 1880. Give background on Lewis Carroll and on nonsense writing (See Notes to the Teacher.)

3. Write these phrases on the board, and sketch the drawings or show them on a transparency.



Phattfaccia  
Stupenda



Manypeepia  
Upsidownis

For more examples, see “Nonsense Botany” in *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, Dover Publications, Inc., 1951. State that the creator of these was Edward Lear, who included them in a book that he published in 1871. Give background on Edward Lear and his contribution to nonsense writing in the Victorian Era. (See Notes to the Teacher.)

4. Have students complete **Handout 29**.

**Suggested Responses:**

1. “[D]rop him a line” can refer either to a written note or to a fishing line. “German” is applied in a singular manner, rather than in the usual grammatical collective sense.
2. The words that carry double meanings in reference to dogs and trees are “bark” and “bough.”

5. Have students complete **Handout 30**.

**Suggested Responses:**

1. breakfast and lunch = brunch; broiled and roasted = broasted; squeeze and crunch = scrunch
2. supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

6. Have students complete **Handout 31**. Then have volunteers share original limericks.
7. Discuss the life of Gilbert and the characteristics of his verse. (See Notes to the Teacher.) Play a selection or two from one of the more popular operas such as *The Mikado* or *The Pirates of Penzance*—a film version if possible, or a musical recording if time and availability prohibit film.
8. Have small groups read and respond to **Handout 32**. If possible, have students recite and act out passages from Gilbert and Sullivan or write their own imitations and perform them for the class.

**Optional Activities**

1. Choose a patter song from Gilbert and Sullivan, and read it rapidly to the class. (The patter songs were intended to be sung very rapidly with only scant pauses for breath, and depended partially upon rapid delivery for their effect and humor.)
2. Ask small groups to research more examples of Nonsense Botany and prepare some posters for the class. Sources are *Nonsense Songs, More Nonsense*, and *Laughable Lyrics* by Lear.
3. Lear also did *Nonsense Cookery*, in which he used parody for the recipes. Direct students to prepare a short cookbook of contemporary humorous recipes.
4. Have small groups experiment with an exercise on grammatical structure and present results to the class.
5. Have students invent some limericks and illustrate them.
6. Have small groups discuss what the function of humor apparently was in Victorian times, and whether this humor is still funny today. One member from each group will become part of a team to debate “Is Victorian Humor Timeless or Outdated?”
7. Ask students to read “The Practical Joker” and write an essay describing what practical jokes might be fun today.

## Pardon My Pun

**Directions:** One of the favorite forms of humor in Victorian England was the pun, a play on words. After reading the examples below, explain how the examples illustrate the definition.

1. a play on words so as to give different meanings or applications

- From a poem by Lewis Carroll called "Two Brothers"

"Do you see that old trout with a turn-up-nose snout?  
He's the one I like best in the stream.  
Tomorrow I mean to invite him to dine  
(We should all of us think),  
If the day should be fine, I'll just drop him a line,  
And we'll settle what time we're to meet . . ."

- From the travel books of Edward Lear  
"German, Gerwomen and Gerchildren"

2. the use of words alike or nearly alike in sound but different in meaning

- From *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll; Alice is in a garden full of talking flowers. The talking Rose says that there is a tree in the middle of the garden to protect them. The dialogue goes like this:

"But what could it do, if any danger came?" Alice asked.  
"It could bark," said the Rose.  
"It says 'Bough-wough'," cried a Daisy . . .

## “Beware the Jabberwock . . .”

**Directions:** In 1855, Lewis Carroll published a “tongue-in-cheek” stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry; in 1871, the stanza reappeared as the opener for the poem “Jabberwocky” in the book, *Through the Looking Glass*. Carroll has Humpty Dumpty explain what the nonsense words mean:

“You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem *Jabberwocky*?”

“Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.”

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

“’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

“That’s enough to begin with,” Humpty Dumpty interrupted: “there are plenty of hard words there. ‘Brillig’ means four o’clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner.”

“That’ll do very well,” said Alice: “and ‘slithy’?”

“Well, ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active.’ You see its like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.”

“I see it now,” Alice remarked thoughtfully: “and what are ‘toves’?”

“Well, ‘toves’ are something like badgers—they’re something like lizards—and they’re something like corkscrews.”

“They must be very curious creatures.”

“They are that,” said Humpty Dumpty: “also they make their nests under sundials—also they live on cheese.”

“And what’s to ‘gyre’ and to ‘gimble’?”

“To ‘gyre’ is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To ‘gimble’ is to make holes like a gimlet.”

“And the ‘wabe’ is the grass plot round a sundial, I suppose?” said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

“Of course it is. It’s called ‘wabe,’ you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it—”

“And a long way beyond it on each side,” Alice added.

“Exactly so. Well then, ‘mimsy’ is ‘flimsy and miserable’ (there’s another portmanteau for you). And a ‘borogove’ is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round—something like a live mop.”

“And then ‘mome raths’?” said Alice. “If I’m not giving you too much trouble.”

“Well, a ‘rath’ is a sort of green pig: but ‘mome’ I’m not certain about. I think it’s short for ‘from home’—meaning that they’d lost their way, you know.”

“And what does ‘outgrabe’ mean?”

“Well, ‘outgribing’ is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you’ll hear it done, maybe—down in the wood yonder—and when you’ve once heard it you’ll be *quite* content. Who’s been repeating all that hard stuff to you?”

“I read it in a book,” said Alice.

Although he uses nonsense words in “Jabberwocky,” Lewis Carroll maintains the structure of language in the way you are used to dealing with it. To prove this to yourself, use meaningful words in the blank spaces below.

“Twas \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_y \_\_\_\_\_s

Did \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_\_:

All \_\_\_\_\_y were the \_\_\_\_\_s;

And the \_\_\_\_\_s \_\_\_\_\_.

Portmanteau words are the opposite of puns. A pun gets more than one meaning out of a single word. A portmanteau word packs multiple meanings into a single, newly-coined word. A portmanteau is a traveling bag, a piece of luggage. Since one packs several items of clothing into a *portmanteau*, Lewis Carroll decided to use that term for words that function in the same way. In *Through the Looking Glass*, he has Humpty Dumpty define the term:

“Well, ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active.’ You see, it’s like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.”

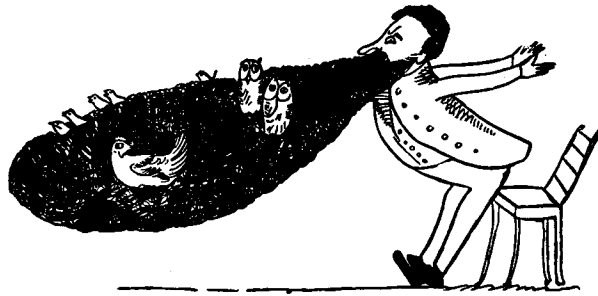
Besides compacting two words into one as in the example above, portmanteau words can be formed by expanding a word into several joined words. Edward Lear coined the word “splendidophorospherostiphongious” in that manner. To the basic word, *splendid* he hooked suffixes like *phorous* meaning “having,” and *phon* referring to speech sounds. He produced a nonsense word, but it surely increased the effect of the adjective *splendid*.

1. List other portmanteau words that are formed by compacting two words into one.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What famous portmanteau word, formed by expansion, is used in *Mary Poppins*?

## There Was An Old Man Named Lear

**Directions:** No one has topped Edward Lear in the writing of the humorous verse form called the limerick. Study this classic limerick structure, examine the drawings and verses by Lear, and then write your own limerick.

1. Five lines
2. Rhyme scheme:
  - a. Lines 1, 2, and 5 rhyme.
  - b. Lines 3 and 4 are shorter rhyming lines.
3. The humor results from paradox (contradictory ideas) or from unexpected, preposterous ideas.



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!

Edward Lear customarily joined the third and fourth lines of the pattern in the third line of his four-line limericks.



There was an old man in a tree,  
Whose whiskers were lovely to see;  
But the birds of the air, pluck'd them perfectly bare  
To make themselves nests in that tree.

## W. S. Gilbert: Social Satirist

**Directions:** Read and respond to the following satirical lyrics.

### The Policeman's Lot

When a felon's not engaged in his employment,  
Or maturing his felonious little plans,  
His capacity for innocent enjoyment  
Is just as great as any honest man's.  
Our feelings we with difficulty smother  
When constabulary duty's to be done.  
Ah, take one consideration with another,  
A policeman's lot is not a happy one!

When the enterprising burglar's not a-burgling,  
When the cut-throat isn't occupied in crime,  
He loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling,  
And listen to the merry village chime.  
When the coster's finished jumping on his mother,  
He loves to lie a-basking in the sun.  
Ah, take one consideration with another,  
The policeman's lot is not a happy one!

### The Practical Joker

Oh what a fund of joy jocund lies hid in harmless hoaxes!  
What keen enjoyment springs  
From cheap and simple things!  
What deep delight from sources trite inventive humour coaxes,  
That pain and trouble brew  
For every one but you!  
Gunpowder placed inside its waist improves a mild Havannah,  
Its unexpected flash  
Burns eyebrows and moustache;  
When people dine no kind of wine beats ipecacuanha,  
But common sense suggests  
You keep it for your guests—  
Then naught annoys the organ boys like throwing red-hot coppers,  
And much amusement bides  
In common butter-slides:  
  
Surprising, too, what one can do with fifty fat black beetles—  
And treacle on a chair  
Will make a Quaker swear!  
Then sharp tin tacks  
And pocket squirts—  
And cobblers' wax  
For ladies' skirts—

And stringy snares across the stairs cause unexpected croppers.  
Coal scuttles, recollect.  
Produce the same effect.  
A man possessed  
Of common sense  
Need not invest  
At great expense—  
It does not call  
For pocket deep.  
These jokes are all  
Extremely cheap.  
If you commence with eighteenpence (it's all you'll have to pay).  
You may command a pleasant and a most instructive day.

A good spring gun breeds endless fun. and makes men  
jump like rockets,  
And turnip-heads on posts  
Make very decent ghosts:  
Then hornets sting like anything, when placed in waist-  
coat pockets—  
Burnt cork and walnut juice  
Are not without their use.  
No fun compares with easy chairs whose seats are stuffed  
with needles—  
Live shrimps their patience tax  
When put down people's backs—  
And slimy slugs  
On bedroom floors  
And water jugs  
On open doors—  
Prepared with these cheap properties, amusing tricks to play,  
Upon a friend a man may spend a most delightful day!

### **True Diffidence**

My boy, you may take it from me,  
That of all the afflictions accurst  
With which a man's saddled  
And hampered and addled,  
A diffident nature's the worst.  
Though clever as clever can be—  
A Crichton of early romance—  
You must stir it and stump it,  
And blow your own trumpet,  
Or, trust me, you haven't a chance.

Now take, for example, my case:  
I've a bright intellectual brain—  
In all London city  
There's no one so witty—  
I've thought so again and again.  
I've a highly intelligent face—  
My features cannot be denied—  
But, whatever I try, sir,  
I fall in—and why, sir?  
I'm modesty personified!

As a poet, I'm tender and quaint—  
I've passion and fervour and grace—  
From Ovid and Horace  
To Swinburne and Morris.  
They all of them take a back place,  
Then I sing and I play and I paint;  
Though none are accomplished as I,  
To say so were treason:  
You ask me the reason?  
I'm diffident, modest, and shy!