

# **The Meaning of Nonsense in Children's Victorian Literature:**

## **The Philosophy and Psychoanalysis beneath Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*.**



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**Abstract:**

Since its first appearance in the Victorian Period, Nonsense has been considered a mere source of amusement and laughter. It has been classified as another children's literary genre, something to be used only to entertain them. In addition, it has always been considered meaningless and something which does not contribute to children's education. However, behind the laughter that nonsense provokes, there might be some hidden meaning. Underneath all its laughter and its amusing rhetoric, there can be found some of the most influential theories of Psychoanalysis and Existentialist philosophy. To illustrate this, I will analyse some of the texts in Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846) following the Freudian theories of the Oedipal Complex, The Unheimlich and the idea of the doppelgänger among others. In addition, I will also explore Lear's work following the existentialist line of thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, focusing in the concept of nihilism. By doing this, I aim at demonstrating how this genre has not been fairly labelled, and it should belong to 'higher literature'. In addition, I aim at proving that it is a powerful source of meaning and answers to most of human's questions and preoccupations.

## **II. Introduction: Nonsense as a literary Genre and Edward Lear's contribution to it.**

Nonsense first appeared in classical Greek writing, even though it was not part of the literary tradition as we know it today. At that time, Nonsense was part of the oral tradition and was mostly used during the Roman festivities of the Saturnalia as a mere object of entertainment. There is also proof that this genre was one of the rhetoric tools of Court Jesters in the Medieval Period, which took advantage of it especially during the Feast of the Fools. Later, in the context of Renaissance Humanism, Erasmus of Rotterdam proclaimed that this genre demonstrated the wisdom that lies in madness or folly.

Thus, it can be clearly seen that Nonsense is not a literary device created in modern times, but a source of entertainment and joy that dates from old times. However, it reached its highest point during Victorian England thanks to authors such as Lewis Carroll (1832- 1898), and specially Edward Lear (1812-1888), who is considered the father of Nonsense.

Edward Lear (1812-1888) was the twentieth of twenty-one children. He lived with his family in Highgate, a little village at the north of London. His father was a successful stockbroker, Past Master of the Fruiterer's Company and Freeman of the City of London, giving to the family the commodities of the middle-class that this status offered. However, his father was imprisoned for a short period for fraud and debt, and the family had to move to the edges of London. During his whole life, Lear was raised by his older sister Anne, who is said to have played an important role in his imaginative development and thus, in his limericks and nonsense stories. From childhood, he suffered from asthma and short-sight, and at the age of six he was diagnosed with epilepsy – what he referred to as 'the presence of the Demon'. Nevertheless, his illnesses did not stop him from learning to write and draw, and in 1830 he published a book of drawings *Illustrations of the Family Psittacidae, or Parrots*. Due to the genius of his work, he began to work for the Earl of Derby between 1831 and 1837. There he used to entertain the guests of the family, as well as the children with his composed verses, that later he will name as 'limericks', and with drawings of the creatures in his verses.

He published a book which contained these verses under the pseudonym of 'old Derry down Derry' but in 1846, after being appointed drawing-master to Queen Victoria (1837-1919) he published his first version of *A Book of Nonsense*; the book achieved a high success and in 1861 he

published a second edition. After 1876, he would only publish his autobiographical poems ‘How Pleasant to know Mr. Lear!’ and ‘Some Incidents in the life of my Uncle Arly’ and the second part of ‘Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos’. He dies in 1888 in San Remo, Italy, where he had settled permanently in 1870.

For him, Nonsense was ‘the breath of my nostrils’ a response to ‘this ludicrously whirligig life which one suffers & laughs at afterwards’ (Lear, 2001), he understood nonsense as a joy, playful thing that helped human beings to escape the oppression of the sad life they had to live. But, what is nonsense to the common audience that does not experiment the world as writers do, rather than a simple form of amusement?

To answer this question, an accurate definition of nonsense must be given. According to the Cambridge dictionary, nonsense is a noun with two meanings: 1) an idea, something said or written, or behaviour that is silly or stupid; or 2) language that cannot be understood because it does not mean anything. This definition is quite accurate; however, it cannot be completely applied to *literary Nonsense* since this genre does not aim at absurdity *per se*, it does have something to say, it does mean something. An interesting view of what literary nonsense is was given by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his book *The Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994) where he said that nonsense is ‘meta-sense’ and that ‘nonsense texts are not explicitly parodic, they turn parody into a theory of serious literature’ (Lecercle, 1994: 2). Therefore, we could say that this genre in all its intelligibility and its ‘weirdness’ has actually a meaning; it really wants to convey some ideas.

Trying to find which are the ideas that Nonsense wants to transmit to its audience is what Lecercle does in foresaid book. He claims that “there is an implicit philosophy on nonsense, a philosophy in act or *in nuce*; and nonsense texts reflect and comment on the practice of philosophers” (1994:4). What he is proposing here is that nonsense holds philosophy at its core, as something that cannot be detached from it. However, the philosophy that he talks about refers to the philosophy of linguistics; that is, the paradox that nonsense represents to the linguistic realm. Even though his research method – which is based on the four layers of linguistics: grammar, syntax, phonetics and pragmatics – is significant and succeeds in discovering most of the hidden meaning that lays under the bizarre surface of nonsense, it fails to show the deeper meaning of this form of literature that Nonsense is.

Others, such as Dr. Abraham Ettelson have tried to analyse nonsense in a particularly different way. This author, for instance, tried to analyse a mythical oeuvre of Nonsense – Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* – from a Jewish point of view. He tried to decode this book from the basis of the Talmudic Jewish ritual. For him, this book was a cryptogram of this specific Jewish ceremony. However, once again, by focusing on such an aspect, attaching henceforth the whole text to a single meaning, the real value and significance of nonsense is lost.

Hence, a new formula of analysis should be found to extract all meaning and aim of the genre. I propose to analyse it as Bruno Bettelheim analyses fairy-tales in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1975)*, by searching for those aspects that make it meaningful to their readership. We must analyse it within the range of the children’s psychology and see which are the lessons that it carries in its form as well as in its content. We must investigate which themes populate the land of madness that nonsense inhabits. We must get to understand where the boundaries of this genre are, which lines blur and where he finds the basis for its teachings.

To accomplish this aim, I will use Lear’s book *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse* and through the length of this essay, several poems, limericks, stories and drawings will be analysed from a psychoanalytical point of view. To go further, those texts and drawings will also be explored as well from a philosophical point of view, using existentialist theories. This analysis will have as its utmost aim to demonstrate that this field of literature can host as many revolutionary ideas and/or feelings as any other text. And most importantly, that the classification of the genre as Children’s literature has been given to it in an unfair way.

In a first section, Lear’s nonsense will be looked at from a psychoanalytical perspective, trying to find on it some hints of different Freudian theories. First, I will try to discover how different Oedipal relationships – mother-son and/or father-daughter are depicted. Then, I will explore the concepts of the Uncanny or *Unheimlich*, as well as the concepts of Id, Ego and Superego. Limericks, verses and stories will be scrutinized to find these aspects of the Freudian psychoanalytical theories since they are the most acknowledged and applied to children’s literature as well. The texts and drawings that Lear created will be classified depending on the type of psychoanalytical concepts that they represent; and will be therefore analysed following the precepts of Freud on those topics.

Secondly, in a broader part that will be divided in two sub-sections, Nonsense will be approached from an Existentialist regard having as basis the theories of two of the most influential philosophers in this field: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813 -1855). In the first sub section, Nietzsche's theories of nihilism, perspectivism and the eternal return will be approached, since they are the ones which are widely attached to problems of human existence. In the second sub section, a Kierkegaardian approach to the major questions of humanity will be used. The aim is to demonstrate that Nonsense, in its disguised naïveté, addresses some of the questions that arouse the greatest anxieties in the human being. For instance, when in a story called 'Miss Maniac', Lear writes 'Then I forget that earth is earth, and that myself am life, and nature seems to die away in darkness, hell and strife.' (Lear, 2010: 24); he is indirectly posing the question of 'What is the world made of?' 'What are we human beings?', to which he responds in a beautiful, joyful and deep limerick in which he says 'myself am life'.

As far as I see it, in his Nonsensical oeuvre, Lear is extremely capable of addressing the abovementioned topics in a way that any other writer of this genre has managed to. His coinages and portmanteau words mixed with long sentences full of meaning give the perfect balance to the minds of children and adults who want to sail the waters of the fantasy world in a way that amuses them, but that gives them several lessons and poses questions that threaten their imagination. His monsters and weirdly shaped creatures give the touch of magic to a world full of contradictions, of paradox, a world of nonsense secretly inhabited by psychological thoughts and concepts, and some of the greatest philosophical questions that the human being has ever posed. Therefore, the aim of this essay will be to get as close to these ideas as possible and try to give a Freudian, Nietzsche's and Kierkegaardian point of view, without breaking the magic that nonsense verse adds to our mundane lives.



## II. Freudian Psychoanalysis: Oedipal and Pre-oedipal principles, The Uncanny, and the three stages of personality: ID, EGO and SUPEREGO.

To approach nonsense from a Freudian-based psychoanalytical point of view it is very important to keep in mind the fact that what forms the basis of his theory are dreams and their content. As reported by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)<sup>1</sup> dreams are populated by numerous images that can be analysed and from which we can extract very different and dissimilar meanings. Those images that dreams display come from a very special place of the human mind: the unconscious. This place in the mind is where repressed thoughts and desires are stored; and from where they can re-appear in the conscious mind, most of the time in the shape of dreams.

However, narratives and poems are also made of these same images that populate dreams and give them various meanings. And nonsense literature, just like dreams, is full of those juxtaposing images that on a first insight would seem not to have any structured sense. But if we look closer we can find that they contain the most typical messages that the unconscious mind delivers through dreams.

To fully understand Freud's theory, there is a need to define some key concepts. First, we shall approach the concepts of the Ego, the Superego and the Id, which are the three parts in which the father of psychoanalysis divided the human mind. The Ego is supposed to act following the reality principle<sup>2</sup>; it seeks to satisfy the instinctual drives of the Id so it will bring benefits in the long term instead of bringing grief. It opposes to the Id, which is the disorganized part of the personality; it contains instinctual drives such as bodily needs, desires and impulses. It also contains the libido which makes it to act in consonance with the pleasure principle<sup>3</sup>. Finally, the Superego is the part of the mind that aims for perfection; it includes the individual's ego ideals, spiritual goals

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<sup>1</sup> **Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)** was an Austrian neurologist which is considered the father of Psychoanalysis. He was born to Galician Jewish parents in Freiburg. In 1881 he was qualified as doctor of medicine at the University of Vienna where he was an associated professor. And in 1885 he set up his clinical practice in the same town. In 1928 he fled Austria to escape the Nazi persecution of Jews and he lived in exile in UK until 1939, where he died. Some of his most important works are: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

<sup>2</sup> **Reality Principle:** A psychoanalytic concept, originally proposed by Sigmund Freud, that compels people to defer gratification when necessary due to the obstacles of reality. (Psych Central, <https://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/reality-principle/> accessed: 22.05.2017 14:07)

<sup>3</sup> **Pleasure Principle:** According to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the drive or concept which motivates people to seek out immediate pleasure or gratification and avoid pain. (Psych Central, <https://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/pleasure-principle/> accessed: 22.05.2017, 14:15)

and the sense of right and wrong and guilt. This section of the mind is guided by the societal and cultural rules to which the individual is exposed.

In addition to these, Freud also formulates three more concepts which had become the most popular in his theory. Those are the Uncanny (or Unheimlich) which refers to something that is strange in its familiarity; a thing that unconsciously reminds us of the instinctual drives of the Id which we have been repressing. This term first appeared in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919). Additionally, he puts forward a term which is related with experiences of individuals and the changes that they brought in their personality: the Oedipus Complex. It is stated by Freud as being part of a stage of the life in every child. In the Oedipal stage the child feels attracted to the parent of the different gender and wants to take the place of the parent of the same gender. This is produced by the sexual drives of the id. On a regular basis, this results in boys experiencing castration anxiety, whereas girls undergo a feeling of penis envy. Notwithstanding, this idea of penis envy is no longer a widely accepted idea, and some Psychoanalysts have discredited it in the past years.

Hence, as all those aspects comprise a very important part of the mind, it is not rare that they appear in literature narratives, which are intrinsically connected to the desires and fears of the mind. As Bettelheim says:

[...] The imaginary of fairy tales helps children better than anything else in their most difficult and yet most important and satisfying task: achieving a more mature consciousness to civilize the chaotic pressures of their unconscious. (Bettelheim, 2010:23)

What demonstrates that those narratives which can attract the attention of children with their imaginative and sometimes funny side, are those which express most of the fears of the unconscious and explore the realm of the mind. Thus, it is right indeed to state that Nonsense carries most of those Freudian concepts, and allows the children to explore them in an amusing way. To illustrate this, I will proceed to analyse several poems, limericks and drawings and finally a story created by Edward Lear. To follow a coherent analysis of the texts, they will be divided into thematic blocks which will follow the different concepts that have been previously presented.

The first topic to be explored is that of the unconscious, which is related to that of the uncanny. Both are shown to be in close relationship, since what the uncanny symbolizes are simply the desires that are repressed and hidden in the unconscious mind. In Lear's work, those topics are often expressed in the form of drawings. Those drawings also evoke the idea of the doppelgänger –

something or someone which is equal or highly resembling to you. As we can see in the two following pictures:

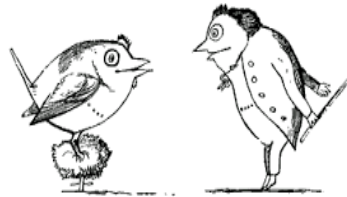


Fig. 1 (Lear, 2001:173)

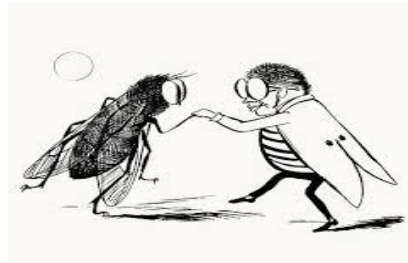


Fig. 2 (Lear, 2001:337)

The first of these pictures is attached to a limerick about a man who despised the birdsong. This drawing evokes the idea of the doppelgänger, since we can see that both bird and human being carry a close resemblance to each other. This similarity between both arises uneasiness, or uncanniness. Something in the bird is reminiscent to the human, and vice versa, which make both familiar, but bearing something that provokes a kind of rejection – something which the uncanny holds at its core. Additionally, the idea of the bird being the alter ego of the human is suggesting that the drive expressed by the Id that has been repressed and hidden in the unconscious mind is that of the freedom. This is represented by the metaphor of flying, which is something that the human being relates to the higher level of freedom, and at the same time, something which is unknown to him.

The second of these drawings follows similar lines. It shows a person who resembles, in his physical aspect and its clothes, the fly that accompanies him in the drawing. Then again, the idea of freedom through being able to fly appears here, being therefore something which is quite recurrent in Lear's work. In fact, Lear's major drawings concerned ornithology, something that might suggest and reinforce the idea of flying and its consequent freedom as being stored in his own unconscious mind.

Another drawing that suggests the idea of the uncanniness or uneasiness is that of the '*Barkia Howalowdia*' (see fig 3). Even though, in this drawing the idea of the doppelgänger is not represented since there is no double; the drawing which presents a plant whose flowers are wolves' heads is still reminiscent of the idea of uneasiness or uncanniness. As we can see, the picture is a combination of the beautiful with that



Fig. 3 *Barkia Howalowdia*  
(Lear, 2001:383)

which ‘monstrous’. It shows two very familiar objects as flowers and canines which reminds us how in the unconscious mind every image is based on the mixture of the beautiful with the ugly or threatening. Besides, the image of the dog also represents in fairy tales and children stories something which is haunting the hero; and if we apply this theory to the drawing, those heads might be the metaphor of the fears hidden in the unconscious and trying to find their way out of the conscious mind.

Likewise, the drawing linked with ‘*The Adventures of Lear in Crete*’ (see fig 4.) also features some characteristics of the uncanny. However, like in the previous one, there is no reference to the doppelgänger since there is no doubling involved. In contrast, it reinforces the idea of the Id as something whose desires are hidden in the unconscious. The mouflon could be a metaphor of the mythical figure of the satyr, which symbolized sexual desires. Therefore, this image can be analysed as an allegory of the Ego – the small human figure – running away from the drives of the unconscious Id – represented by the mouflon.



Fig.4 (Lear, 2001: 190)

Then, as it can be seen in the previous drawing, the topics of id, ego and superego are also explored in several limericks, poems and drawings. For example, there is a limerick related to the drawing on fig. 5 that says:

There was a Young Person of Crete,  
Whose toilette was far from complete;  
She dressed in a sack, spickle-speckled with black,  
That ombliferous person of Crete<sup>4</sup> (Lear, 2001:164)

This limerick is suggesting that the drive of the Id most remarkable for this person is related to the Oedipus complex as well. Both the drawing and the limerick refer to the phase of a child when he is still in the amniotic sack; a place where the utmost safety is found, somewhere where you are not exposed about the dangers of the world. According to Freud this is the only moment in life that we are free of traumas, because the first one is the trauma of birth. In a way, both the limerick and the drawing suggest a strong connexion with the mother.



Fig. 5 (Lear: 2010:164)

<sup>4</sup> Lear, Edward. *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*. London: Penguin Books, 2001. Henceforth, all references to this work are indicated by page number

In the text the word ‘ombliferous’ emerges as one of the most nonsensical words of the limerick in its form, but at the same time it is the word which provides more evidence to the thought of the amniotic sac. This word is reminiscent of ‘umbilical’, and subsequently of the ‘umbilical cord. Moreover, in the third verse we read ‘spickle-speckled with black’ which means that it is ‘flecked’ with blackness, which again is one of the peculiarities of the unborn phase.

A poem that also represents the three parts of the human personality is ‘*The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bó*’. The centre of this poem is the story of a young creature that proposes marriage to a princess on another coast, but she refuses. Because of his prompt proposition, we can clearly agree that his actions are driven by the wants and desires of the Id:

There he heard a Lady talking;  
To some milk-white Hens of Dorking, -  
This the Lady Jingly Jones!  
[...]  
Lady Jingly! Lady Jingly!  
Sitting where the pumpkins blow,  
Will you come and be my wife? (324-325)

He is shown to be very impulsive by asking this lady to marry even if he does not know her, he is just impelled by his sexual drive. On the contrary, the lady will be a symbol of the Ego, since she refuses the proposal of the young boy because she is already engaged. This act shows how she is more rational, therefore operating through the reality principle that regulates the Ego’s decisions.

‘*The Story of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple*’ perfectly depicts what to be driven by the id means. It deals with seven families of different species that have seven children and shows how all the children of these families are driven by the pleasure principle. Conversely, the key message of the story is to show that indulging in those desires and not considering the ego’s restrictions will lead every person to their downfall. As we can see, all the characters in this short story die: children because they indulge in their oral desires, and their parents because they succumb to grief. Although there is a difference in their behaviour, since the parents make themselves to be kept in bottles in the museum to be preserved for ever, which might be a reference of the rational part of the mind. This is suggested by the idea of the preservation of the species, since in the story there is no mention of other animals of their type, and the adults might be considering this fact and wanting to preserve themselves as an example of its species.

In addition, this story is also linked to the Oedipus complex, since it deals with separation anxiety from the beginning:

One day all the Seven Fathers and the Seven Mothers of the Seven Families agreed that they would send their children out to see the world. (196)

The topic of fathers sending away their children is recurrent in Fairy Tales and Children's literature. It normally connects to the fear that every child has of being rejected by their parents, which they believe to be the only people who can love or care about them. And they fear that one day they would perhaps stop loving them and just send them away. In this story, this idea rises from the beginning but it also reinforces the idea of the parents loving the children, since they give them several directions on how to act in different scenarios. Thus, clearly stating that parental separation is something every child must experience regardless of the love of his/her parents towards him. Besides, given that the fathers and mothers also give some counsel to the animal children, as for example when the owls say: 'If you find a Mouse, tear him up into seven slices, and eat him cheerfully, but without quarrelling.' (197), they can be seen as the embodiment of the reality principle. This sentence reinforces the idea of the parents as a symbol of the Ego, since they use the rational thought when they think on how to deal with such a situation, something which is at the core of the reality principle that directs the actions of this part of human personality.

Finally, we are going to explore how the Oedipus Complex is also present in some other texts in this book. As I have pointed out, *'The Story of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple'* introduces this topic and links it to the idea of the separation anxiety. This exploration of children's anxiety towards an imminent separation of their parents is also explored in a poem called *'The Jumblies'*. Yet in this poem the separation is a decision taken by the children themselves:

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,  
In a Sieve they went to sea:  
In spite of all their friends could say,  
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,  
In a Sieve they went to sea!(253)

This first stanza of the poem deals with the subject of freedom, something which is recurrent all along the poem. Alongside with it, the text also talks about growing up as a voyage through all seas and lands. As we can see, they sail 'to the Western Sea' and are faced with different lands inhabited by different species of animals, which represent the different situations to which every

human being must deal with along his/her childhood and adolescence in order to gain maturity. In the second stanza, in line 3 we read 'For the sky is dark, and the voyage long' (254). This darkness and length refer to the path towards maturity, which is full of mystery and danger, normally represented in the children's stories with blackness or darkness.

Nevertheless, separation anxiety is not the only anxiety that Freud proposed to be related to this period of childhood. He also introduced castration anxiety as something intrinsically related to the Oedipal phase. Lear delves into it specially in three poems: '*The Uncareful Cow, who walked about*', '*The History of the Pobble, who has no toes, and the Princess Bink*' and '*The Pobble who has no toes*'. Despite all three poems analyse the topic in a very dissimilar way, they all rely on the concept of losing some part of the body.

The poem of '*The Uncareful Cow, who walked about*' expresses this feeling, since it shows how a female gendered animal goes through not only the process of losing an appendix of the body – a horn – which is a symbol of the penis; but also, because previously to that, the animal acquires this appendix, reversing therefore the idea of the castration. Even though the poem does suggest that the horn that grows in the head of the cow is a sort of punishment for not being careful, it can be understood that it was the animal who provoked this punishment because of the desire to get the appendix. However, the fact that at the end of the poem we are told that 'bit by bit/ she rubbed the Horn away' (270) suggests not only that castration is something that humans create by themselves - and thus boys should not be worried about being castrated by others - but also that every problem every human has can be fixed if we look for the right answer to it.

The other two accounts on Oedipal Complex and its relationship with castration anxiety can be found in the poems of '*The History of the Pobble, who has no toes, and the Princess Bink*' and '*The Pobble who has no toes*'. Both poems depict a creature called a pobble, which can be a representation of a male child, since it is small and does not have a broad knowledge of the world. This creature suffers from the fear of losing his toes – here a metaphor of the penis - to which he tries to find a solution. However, in the end of both poems he loses them. The difference resides on how and on the result of this loss.

In the first text, we are told that there is a princess with whom he falls in love, and in return to marry her she asks him 'you will give me all your toes, [...] /As a proof of your deep genteel

affection.’ (395-396); whereas in the second one, we find out that ‘A sea-green Porpoise carried away /His wrapper of scarlet flannel. / [...] His face at once became forlorn/On perceiving that all his toes were gone!’ (397-398). This change in how the pobble loses his toes makes a significant difference in interpretation: on the first one, the castration is produced by finding someone to love and which will replace the loss, whereas in the second one, the castration receives no compensation and it leads to sadness and despair.

As reported by the father of psychoanalysis, the feeling of castration anxiety is provoked by a fear in the child for not being able to reach the ideal of adult sexuality, then being solved when we find someone who accepts us as its sexual partner. One explanation of why Lear gave these two versions of the same poem is to demonstrate that in accordance with his beliefs one must find one’s sexual and sentimental partner to be happy. Also, ‘*The Pobble who has no toes*’ might be a reference on how he felt, since he never married. A fact that might have left him feeling alienated from society, since he was unable to fulfil the idealized role of husband and father which was of great importance in the Victorian Period.

Overall, Lear’s work is an inexhaustible example of how the Freudian theories emerge from nonsense. This section has analysed some of his texts and has provided some interpretations of them. At the same time, I have shown that not all texts are the canvas for the same lines of thought, and that albeit some texts convey various Freudian meanings, normally there is only one meaning which is the most relevant. Most of these psychoanalytical theories can be found in poems and limericks. Yet as has been demonstrated, Lear’s drawings have as their most recognised theme the use of the uncanny and the unconscious drives and desires, whereas poems and limericks are focused on more specific topics such as the difference between Id, Ego and Superego, the separation anxiety and the castration anxiety. And they show how in every kind of literature, the thoughts and desires of the author permeate the words and make the texts richer in sense and content. Even if these topics take an important role in his literature, they are not the only ones to have a place in it. As it will be shown in the next section, his work is also fully populated of references to existential philosophy.



### **III: Existentialism and Nonsense: Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard.**

In the previous section Lear's Nonsensical poems, drawings and stories have been analysed as Sigmund Freud would analyse dreams. I have also demonstrated how the different theories of the human mind populate these texts. Nevertheless, these theories are not the only ones which are present in those texts which are also full of philosophical references. Consequently, in this section other works in the book *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse* will be analysed following Existentialist theories. As the topic is very extensive, the analysis will focus on two of the most representative philosophers on Existentialism – Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813 -1855) – and the analysis will be separated into two sub-sections, one per author, where their most influential theories will be discussed and applied to Lear's texts.

Yet, we should first explain what the existentialist thought consists of. Existentialism is a philosophic movement that emerged in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The movement was formed by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, but also by writers and artists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett or Simone de Beauvoir. Those thinkers considered the nature of human condition – or existence – as a key philosophical problem and explored it in several ways. They also thought that the world had no intrinsic meaning or purpose, and therefore life had no purpose either. Individuals were believed to have the need to bear the responsibility for their own decisions and actions, as there was no ultimate higher deity that marked the rules of life. God does not exist anymore – 'Death of God' - and therefore the rules and morals that he carries do not have any meaning and people should not cling to their faith to religion.

The fundamental topic of Existentialism is nihilism – a theory based on the idea that life has no meaning, no value and no truth, since there has been a defeat of all the powers who rule the world, and this 'nonsensical' life may lead to a feeling of despair or anxiety. However, some philosophers such as Kierkegaard, tried to demonstrate the need of Christian values in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century societies. This theory of Nihilism was extensively explored by the two philosophers that are going to be used to analyse Nonsense. However, the one who delved most into it was Friedrich Nietzsche, as we can see in its book *The Will to Power*.

## **i. Nihilism, Death of God and Perspectivism: Nietzsche's philosophy in Lear's work.**

Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>5</sup> was the most influential philosopher to deal with the theory of nihilism. Alongside Kierkegaard, he is considered one of the fathers of Existentialism and the Existentialist movement that has notably influenced modern thought. Among his works there are several concepts that had stood out along the centuries: Nihilism, the Death of God and Perspectivism. Nihilism has been described before as the complete loss of hope in human existence which Nietzsche linked to the Death of God. As stated in *The Will to Power*, at this moment of history God is dead, and now science should be treated as the new religion, because it is the only one which gives real answers to the questions of human creation and existence.

The trouble comes when due to a lack of faith, life becomes meaningless, and therefore people cannot find a reason why they should keep living their despairing life. A life that is subjected to the 'Eternal return' – life is a succession of the same events, and with infinite time and number of those events, they will recur infinitely, which leads to even more despair. To solve this problem, Nietzsche created the 'Free Spirit' or *Übermensch*; a model of a strong individual who assumes his values and agrees to live his life as if it was a work of art, without questioning it, and accepting whatever it brings to him. He rules his life according to the will to power, which helps human beings to regain the freedom that will help them to change the perspective of their lives in order to improve their existence.

Perspectivism, on the other hand, is a way of seeing the things that are around us as something which is not fixed. Truths are not fixed; they are interpretations which have been formulated by different perspectives. As he states in his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral sense* (1873):

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (Nietzsche, ed. Breazale, 1979:84.)

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<sup>5</sup> **Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844 – 1900):** was a German philosopher, cultural critic, poet and philologist. He was born in Röcken on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1844, as the son of a Lutheran pastor, something that will deeply affect his thought. At the death of his father, when he was only 5, the family moved to Naumburg. In 1864 he entered the University of Bonn, where he studied theology and the classics, but in 1865 he moved to Leipzig University and in 1868 he became professor of Classical Philology at Basle University. His thought is highly influenced by Schopenhauer's idea of 'no god' and the Aristotelian thought. Some of his most influential works are *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *The Gay Science* (1882 and 1887), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) and *The Will to Power* (published posthumously by Walter Kaufmann in 1968)

Hence, perspectivism basically follows the idea that every human being sees things differently depending on which situations s/he is involved in, what is his/her background or knowledge of the world.

Having already defined the topics that populate Nietzsche's thought, a series of analyse poems and limericks from Lear's book regarding these notions are going to be analysed in their meaning and perhaps its form – as we will see happen with a long nonsensical sentence in *The Complete Book of Nonsense* on page 188. To illustrate this point, the analysis will begin with those poems and limericks that emphasize both the ideas of nihilism and the death of God.

The first text to analyse will be the poem '*When the light dies away on a calm Summer's eve*'. This poem can be considered an allegory of death as the thing that brings peace to the despairing life that human beings must go through. The words 'light' and 'eve' are metaphors of 'life' and 'old age' respectively. The poem represents the moment when someone is dying – or approaching the moment of death – and people are around him/her to keep him company. Subsequently, it tries to represent the thoughts of those people towards the dying men or women; we can see how they see this person as 'More bright as its loneliness passes away' (15, line 7), which means that they have understood the fact that life is lonely and has no meaning, and thus death will rid this person of its suffering because of the nonsense that life is. The joy of the prospect of getting rid of the despair that we perceive in the first lines is opposed to the revival of this feeling in the last four lines:

Some dream that will wake in a desolate heart,  
Every chord into music that long has been hushed,  
Mournful echo! – soon still – for it tolls with a smart,  
That the joys which first woke it, are long ago crushed!  
(15, line 13 -16)

Here, we can perceive how they are concerned about the return of this despair that life brings; this is due to the idea of the eternal return, which is intrinsically linked to nihilism. Ideally, death should take away all the pains that life brings, but if there is an "eternal recurrence" of events, then this pain will be lived infinitely. Hence death will only be a joke, a trick of life to make us believe there is relief, when there is none.

The short story '*Miss Maniac*' also uses the topics of eternal recurrence and nihilism. When on page 24 we read the following lines, we are invaded by feeling of despair and uneasiness:

Then I forget that earth is earth, and that myself am life,

And nature seems to die away in darkness, hell and strife. [...]  
Cold runs my blood from vein to vein – all vacant is mine eye,  
And in my ears a sound of death, and dread eternity! (24)

These lines suggest both that human beings often forget what or who they are, and that this is due to the lack of faith. They also suggest that due to this lack of faith there is this fear of death as not being the end of this forlorn life humans need to live. There is the idea of eternity as something threatening, because the main character does not want to repeat these episodes when she forgets the purpose of her life and feels useless.

In contrast, the poem '*Resignation*', which also follows the lines of the previous ones introduces also the 'solution' to the troubles that the eternal recurrence can bring to humans. With its constant repetition of the line 'What must be, must!' it brings the idea that life is fixed and we cannot change what needs to happen to us. Also, it introduces the idea of 'Amor Fati' – that is to say, loving your life as it is, accepting it and therefore you will not need to fear to repeat it countless times. Yet in the last three lines we see a change of tone: 'I don't think they'll catch me long, /To say – 'What must be, must!'' (43, lines 23-24). Here we can perceive a hint of the *Übermensch* since it shows a certain unconformity to what is happening to his life – being repetitive – and suggests that he is going to do something to change it.

The subject of the 'Amor Fati' can also be found in the limerick '*Old Man of the Border*' (353) and in the poem '*The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs*'. Notwithstanding, there is a huge difference between these two texts given that the first one only embraces the idea of accepting life as it is, since it shows a man who accepts the disorder of his life and is happy about it, whereas the poem suggests the idea of the active nihilism.

So down the staircase they hopped in a minute,  
The Sugar-tongs snapped, and the Crackers said 'crack!'  
The stable was open, the horses were in it;  
Each took out a pony, and jumped on his back. [...]  
They rode through the street, and they rode by the station,  
They galloped away to the beautiful shore;  
(272, lines 17-20 and 273 lines 41-42)

In these verses, we find the metaphor of a Free Spirit liberating himself from the chains of nihilism and nonsensical life, and taking the reins of its life. What Lear is suggesting here, is that everyone can change his/her life, even if they consider themselves of no value to society. He is saying that there is no need for living in the despair of nihilism, that people can change their thought and do whatever we want to with our lives, that we can make them to have the purpose we want our

lives to have. The fact that Lear is presenting the idea of the *Übermensch* as the active nihilist in his poems shows how he was attached to the different thoughts and trends of the philosophy of his time. And in some way, it also demonstrates that he was not a ‘cynical existentialist’, but, like Nietzsche, he believed in a way to re-gain the order that the world had lost because of the ‘Death of God’.

Finally, we are going to see how the Perspectivism ideas also leaked into Lear’s work. We can find perspectivism especially in limericks, even though there is a poem which also carries some perspectivism topics. First, we are going to analyse three limericks that have in common the idea of perspectivism as something inherent in human nature: ‘*Old Man of Abruzzi*’ (79), ‘*Old Person of Gretna*’ (105) and the limerick of the man who cooked his toes (110). All of them present men who see the world in a different way of those who interact with them. For example, in the first limerick we can read:

There was an Old Man of th’Abruzzi,  
So blind that he couldn’t his foot see;  
When they said, ‘That’s your toe,’ he replied. ‘Is it so?  
That doubtful Old Man of th’Abruzzi. (79)

The fact that he is blind might not mean that he is ‘physically blind’, but that he is blind in a psychological way, or that they consider it so, because he understands the world differently – from his own perspective. Also, he is ‘doubtful’, which reinforces the idea of perspectivism, since what this theory claims is that there is no ‘objective truth’ in this world, and we should question everything we see, since we see it only from our perspective, and others may see it differently.

After having explored some of the most essential topics of Nietzsche’s line of thought, and having seen how he stood up for the Death of God and a society managed only by itself, we must carry on to examine Lear’s work from a very different perspective. One that sees the death of God as a unnecessary thing to humanity and therefore promotes the return of the divine figure. One that advocates for the return of Christianity as the law that rules the existence of human beings, but which calls for a different understanding of this religion. We must therefore present Kierkegaard’s thoughts and proceed to analyse some texts in accordance to them.

## ii. Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism and its influence in *The Book of Nonsense*:

Søren Kierkegaard<sup>6</sup> (1813 -1855) is considered the true father of Existentialism. His work deals with the link between existentialism and Christianity. His most recognisable concept is that of the 'Leap of Faith'. The leap is supposed to be a moment of transition, the exact point where a person stops rationalizing everything that is around him or her and starts to believe and just accept things as they are. This topic contradicts Nietzsche's belief in questioning everything in life, and in some way embraces religion as something to believe in. If other philosophers saw religion -specially Christianity – as something to leave behind, Kierkegaard sees it as the answer to the nihilist world of desperation in which science has made us to live. However, he also states that being Christian is an existential problem.

In the words of Kierkegaard, being Christian closes the vision of the world and makes people incapable of existential assimilation because of feeling a turbulent religious address. This address is what shapes the feelings and emotional responses which highly differ from those of a non-Christian. But some of those emotions that faith creates or provokes are false or unreasonable, which lead to passions that are most likely to be 'vices' than 'virtues' in the Christian sense of those expressions.

He also denied the ability of reasoned thought to reach a universal and objective truth. Truths are created by human decisions, not discovered or known, therefore there is no real or universal truth; there is only the subjective truth – a line of thought that also links with Nietzsche's Perspectivism. He considered 'genuine existence' to be subjective, and attached to feelings, emotions and passions. Life is full of passion, and if this 'essential passion' is taken away -for example, as nihilism does – life becomes meaningless and devoid of character.

As we can see, he does not have any clear concepts apart from that of the Leap of Faith. Nevertheless, he possesses some interesting ideas about Christianity and the purpose or meaning of life which are extremely present in Lear's nonsensical oeuvre. Hence, I will proceed to analyse some of those poems and limericks which contain most of these.

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<sup>6</sup> **Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813 -1855)**: was a Danish philosopher, theologian, social critic and religious. He is considered the first existentialist philosopher. He was born at a family in Copenhagen. Studied theology at the University of Copenhagen. He wrote critical texts on organized religion, Christendom, morality, ethics and philosophy of religion. Some of his works are: *On the Concept of Irony with continual reference to Socrates* (1841), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), *Stages of Life's Way* (1845), *Works of Love* (1847), *Christian Discourses* (1848) and *Practice in Christianity* (1850).

To begin with, we can find some of these ideas in the *'Eclogue'*. The verse of this poem that carries more meaning is: 'Sad was the hour,- and luckless the day'(3) since it refers to the dialectic of existence, and the fact that emotions are subjected by thoughts and the different situations humans have to face. Moreover, it also points out the idea of loss and a life devoid of meaning. This is seen because we are told that they leave their home to live in another place, and they all seem as if they had left happiness and 'passion' in their old household. These ideas can also be found in the poem *'My Sweet Home is no longer mine'*, even though there is a major difference. Here, the main topic is a symbolic return to a home; but home is a place that has lost all the meaning for the person that inhabited it before. This can be understood perhaps as a parallelism between nihilism and Christianity. It might be suggesting that once you have been taken away from faith it is usual to return to it in your 'daydream' (68, line 12), but the fact that the narrator is supposed to be dreaming can suggest that returning to religion would be dangerous to our society, and we can only do it on a non-physical level.

In addition, references to Christianity and the despair that the Death of God has brought, are also found in the poem *'The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly'*. Here, we experience a world where no one is happy with what he is, and perhaps that is because they must question everything and find their place in the world by themselves, whereas they need not to do so when God was still 'alive'. The fact that the 'daddy long-legs' cannot sing because he has long legs is a reinforcement of nihilist thought. The reason for his inability to sing is completely nonsensical, and nihilism is exactly that: nonsense. Furthermore, we can see how at the end of the poem their return to faith brings them happiness:

And reached the Gromboolian plain;  
And there they play for evermore  
At Battlecock and suttledore. (248, lines 51-53)

The 'Gromboolian plain' is a reference to heaven, to paradise, since it is the place where these animals can find peace and be happy again. It also suggests that the return to faith and belief in God and therefore to Christianity has filled their lives with sense and purpose again. Henceforth, the poem is showing that religion is needed in human's life to make sense of several things, and to eliminate doubt. This also relates to the idea of the Leap of Faith, since we see the animals to jump on that boat and go to those lands without questioning themselves anything, just accepting that it will bring them to a better place.

In *'The Quangle-Wangle's Hat'* we also find some ideas revolving Christianity and the need to belong to a community or to a faith. As we can see, there is a contrast in the vision of life that the Quangle-Wangle has at the beginning of the poem

But the longer I live on this Crumpetty Tree,  
The plainer that ever it seems to me  
That very few people come this way  
And that life on the whole is far from gay! (391, lines 13-16)

And towards the end

And the Quangle-Wangle said  
To himself on the Crumpetty Tree, -  
'When all these creatures move  
What a wonderful noise there'll be!'  
[...] On the broad green leaves of the Crumpetty Tree,  
And all were as happy as happy could be,  
With the Quangle Wangle Quee. (392, lines 46-49 and 52-54)

This alteration of his thought is subjected to a change in the life of the Quangle Wangle. In the first verses, he does not belong to any community, whereas in the last ones, he does. Hence, the need of belonging to a community which accepts everyone to be happy in life, to find joy and be comfortable with themselves is expressed. This might be a clear reference to Christianity or at least to the religious community. Moreover, the 'hat' that appears in the poem can be interpreted as the site of cult, whereas it is the church or any other place – remember that Protestantism understood religion as something that does not need the mediation of the priest and therefore can be practised at home.

To conclude with this section, what can be considered the most nonsensical text on Lear's book, a long sentence in page 188, will be analysed:

[deerbaringiphowndacuppelloffotografsthismawningwitchisendjootherei  
swunofeechsortsoyookankeepbothifyouliketodoosoanwenyoo==haveab  
etterwunofyourselfletmehavit.  
Yossin seerly,  
DwdL[ear]] (188)

As we can see, there is a complete unintelligible sentence from which no meaning can be extracted. Notwithstanding, according to Benjamin R. Tilghman in *Nonsense*.

Philosophical problems are said to arise when language goes *on holiday* and thus is not doing its usual job, that is, when the use of certain expressions is mistakenly assimilated to that of others so that these expressions turn out to have no use, no role



to play in either language or life. Thus, are born those misleading analogies that are the stuff of philosophical theories, those pictures that hold us captive and prevent us from seeing the world aright. (Tilghman:1990:5)

Subsequently, we could say that this sentence follows the thoughts of Tilghman. Even though there is no meaning that can be extracted from its words, it can rather be extracted from its form. Nonsense has always been understood as the literature form which lacks meaning and cannot be understood, and so has nihilism. Consequently, this sentence can be an allegory of nihilism *per se*; something that is devoid of meaning, and that leave humans filled with despair: the despair of trying to understand what is happening – or what the sentence tries to say – and not being able to.

In conclusion, this section has shown how Nonsensical texts can be the nest of the most widely known existentialist theories. We have seen how both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard had a high influence in Lear's work. Hence, those texts hold most of the answers for the most significant questions of humanity, but at the same time they also create others. It has been shown that creatures such as the Quangle Wangle or the Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs allude to the different types of human beings and their anxieties about life and its outcome. In addition, it has also been demonstrated that nihilism, perspectivism and other philosophical theories can be located even in the most unintelligible texts. We have also been witnesses of how words without meaning can carry a strong message in their form.

#### **IV. Conclusion: nonsense as the allegory of nihilism and other ways to analyse Lear's book:**

*The Book of Nonsense* has been widely known as a source of amusement and joy for children from the Victorian Period, being one of the most famous nonsensical books. Yet it is important to prove, as it has already been done, that this book is not only a mere source of amusement, but that it carries deep meanings in its texts and drawings. We have seen how psychoanalytical and existentialist theories emerge from Lear's verses and limericks, hence becoming a great source of answers to both children and adults. I also have demonstrated that his drawings, if given the appropriate interpretation, can change from simple funny pictures to meaningful art that represent fears and desires of the unconscious. Needless to say, it has been evidenced how this literary genre that has been always understood as a children's genre is actually more than that. I have also shown how Nonsense in general should be classified as something belonging to 'high literature' and not as something barely useful for children.

In the first part of this essay, it has been explored the idea of psychoanalysis as the main source for nonsense's meaning, and specially of Lear's work. We have seen how every type of work in this book can be clearly associated to one or various of Sigmund Freud's theories about the human mind. However, there is a theory with which we have come up more often: that of the Unconscious mind which is linked to the Uncanny or *unheimlich*. Lear's drawings have been proved to be specially influenced by this line of thought. We have seen how drawings such as the one linked to '*The Adventures of Lear in Crete*' or '*Barkia Howalowdia*' encapsulate the essence of what the unconscious mind represents: something threatening that provokes a feeling of uneasiness. Other drawings clearly display the image of a doppelgänger, as it is the case of figures 1 and 2 in this essay. In contrast, texts and limericks carry not only the ideas linked to the unconscious mind – even though they do not predominate in the texts – but also the concepts of the Ego, Id and Superego, and the Oedipal Complex together with the anxieties that it provokes: castration anxiety and separation anxiety. The topic of the three parts of the mind – Ego, Id and Superego – has been shown to be more specially predominant in the stories, being '*The Story of the Seven Families at the Lake Pipple-Popple*' one of those in which it is particularly displayed. Besides, the Oedipal Complex and everything that revolves around it is more present in Lear's Limericks; therefore they can be considered the texts that might be more helpful to children in order to face the anxieties and preoccupations that the Oedipal phase generates in them.

The other main aspect that has been highlighted about nonsense is its capacity to carry existentialist meanings. As I have been able to show in the second part of this work, Nonsense is a great nest of Philosophical theories. Lear's work has been analysed following Friedrich Nietzsche's and Søren Kierkegaard's ideas and it has been demonstrated that most of them can be applicable to this genre. We have seen how poems such as *'When the light dies away on a calm Summer's eve'* or *'The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs'* express through its lines some of the ideas which are at the core of nihilism. Even though it has been clearly acknowledged the fact that both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have a big influence on Lear's work, there is a bigger presence of Nietzsche's ideas in the texts. This might be the case, since Kierkegaard follows a more conservative line of thought, revolving around the importance of Christianity and sustaining that religion is the answer to all the questions that Nihilism and the belief in science and doubt might provoke. Notwithstanding, we could argue that nonsense is, in fact, the perfect embodiment of what those philosophical theories are. Nihilism is supposed to drive human beings into a life devoid of meaning and purpose, and nonsense has always been considered as the most meaningless literary genre. Thence, nonsense could be considered as existentialism per se, since it only generates not only a doubt while reading it by its need to be decoded, sometimes without success, which leads to desperation.

Having said that, it is important to point out that even though this essay has focused on philosophy and psychoanalysis, there are other fields that can be applicable to decipher 'the meaning of nonsense'. For example, a good line of study would be to analyse this oeuvre from the point of view of Gilbert Durand's *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l'imaginaire (1960)*, from the perspective of the Figurative Structuralism and the *Mitocritique*<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, by using psychoanalysis and philosophy this essay has evidenced that nonsense and especially *literary nonsense* is a genre that has been unjustly treated through the ages. I have shown how it can carry the deepest answers to the deepest questions of humanity. Nonsense can be a great tool not only for children, but also to grown up adults, to understand what is happening around them and inside their minds. It is a very playful way to explore the most threatening aspects of the human personality. And it can be a great source of help and answers to deal with some of the problems that we, humans, face during our lives.

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<sup>7</sup> **Mitocritique:** French word. Refers to a literary criticism that uses the myths as its basis. It tries to analyse texts by searching on them several common points with myths, sequences that can repeat and so on.

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