

Scrittura creativa integrata allo studio della letteratura inglese:

i Limericks

(di Fabiana Vendola)

Premessa

Durante il terzo anno di corso, nell'indirizzo linguistico, vengono normalmente presentate le caratteristiche peculiari dei diversi generi letterari. Quando arrivo a parlare di che cos'è la poesia, mi piace proporre questa attività, che, coinvolgendo in prima persona gli studenti come poeti, consente loro di sperimentare in maniera molto pratica l'effetto delle convenzioni poetiche.

Spesso sentir parlare di rima, allitterazione, sillabe accentate e atone e figure retoriche può risultare un po' noioso per giovani discenti di letteratura inglese. Non così se si rendono conto che, non contando correttamente le sillabe o sbagliando una rima, il loro componimento "non funziona", e stride all'orecchio.

Progressione dell'attività

Come inizio, sottopongo agli studenti un breve estratto dal libro *Complete Nonsense*, che raccoglie limericks celebri di Edward Lear. Il brano introduce la figura di Lear e la sua originale attività poetica. Sulla stessa scheda (v. allegato pdf "*limericks worksheet 1*"), gli studenti possono poi leggere alcuni limericks dell'autore ed osservare le divertenti illustrazioni che Lear stesso disegnava.

All'inizio gli studenti sono divertiti dalle stramberie dei limericks, ma anche un po' perplessi. Effettivamente, sembra a tutta prima che i componimenti siano totalmente pervasi dal nonsenso, ma sta all'insegnante guidare i ragazzi al riconoscimento dell'organizzazione tutt'altro che illogica delle brevi poesie.

Allo scopo, ho predisposto due pagine di esercizi, che ben si prestano al lavoro di gruppo. Gli studenti cercano di individuare lo schema metrico e rispondono alle domande delle due schede relativamente a struttura, linguaggio e contenuto dei limericks. Poi la discussione viene trasferita alla classe intera.

La prima pagina di esercizi non contiene immagini, ed è reperibile in calce a questo documento. La seconda contiene due illustrazioni ed è contenuta nell'allegato "*limericks worksheet 3*".

Al termine dell'attività gli studenti hanno compreso come funziona una rima in inglese (la rima parte dall'ultima vocale accentata e si basa sulla coincidenza di suono, non di spelling), sanno riconoscere le allitterazioni, riescono perlopiù a contare le sillabe e a distinguere quelle atone da quelle toniche, e individuano gli elementi strutturali comuni a tutti i limericks.

A questo punto, viene chiesto agli studenti di produrre a casa uno o più limericks, rispettandone le caratteristiche tipiche. L'insegnante opera gli aggiustamenti necessari, d'accordo con gli autori, affinché tutto funzioni alla perfezione, e riporta i limericks più efficaci su di una nuova scheda. Se qualche studente ha colto il suggerimento di accompagnare la propria poesia con un disegno, proprio come faceva Lear, qualche illustrazione viene inclusa nella scheda.

La scheda, fotocopiata, viene distribuita a tutti gli studenti, che sono solitamente compiaciuti di vedere il loro nome abbinato alla propria poesia sulla scheda. Infine, la lettura dei limericks dei compagni costituisce ulteriore motivo di divertimento, soprattutto se contengono “riferimenti a fatti e persone”, come nei casi seguenti:

There was a Young Man from Montana
Who wanted to marry Luana
He gave her a ring
But said not a thing
That very shy Man from Montana

(dedicato ad una compagna di classe di nome Luana)

There was a Young Girl of the Greppi
Who constantly looked very happy
She listened to Charlie
Leero-lee, Leeroo-larlee
That musical Girl of the Greppi

(Greppi è il nome della nostra scuola. Il limerick è stato scritto da Manola, fan sfegatata dell'insegnante di musica Dario Canossi, allora membro di un gruppo musicale con lo pseudonimo di Charlie Hill e oggi cantautore folk affermato con il gruppo “I Luf”)

There was a Young Lady from school
Who always looked ever so cool
Her soap was from Avon
And her penfriend from Devon
Which made her so famous at school

(Autrice del limerick è Adriana, che aveva intrapreso un'attività lavorativa part-time come rappresentante della casa cosmetica Avon. Adriana corrispondeva realmente con un penfriend inglese.)

Conclusione

Probabilmente, quella che si diverte più di tutti sono io! La fantasia dei ragazzi è spesso brillante ed offre soluzioni originali, e lo sforzo di domarla all'interno di un preciso schema formale è per loro, credo, molto stimolante, anche se non sempre semplice.

Negli allegati denominati “*students' limericks*” si possono leggere alcune delle loro composizioni, nonché vedere le simpatiche illustrazioni fornite da alcuni studenti.

Come accennavo più sopra, seguono nelle prossime pagine sia le schede di lavoro che le chiavi agli esercizi proposti.

Edward Lear's Limericks

Exercises

1. Count the stressed and the unstressed syllables in

u \ u u \ u u \
There was an Old Man with a beard
.....
.....
.....
.....

Is the stress pattern regular?

Which lines have the same number of syllables?

Do stressed and unstressed syllables alternate regularly?

2. Compare the stress pattern in all the first and last lines. Are there any variations?
Compare the stress pattern in all the forth lines. Are there any variations?
What are your final considerations on the number of stressed and unstressed syllables?
3. Can you find a rhyme scheme in all the limericks?
Is it the same for all of them?
4. Find elements in the limericks which show that the sound of the words is sometimes more important than the meaning they have.
5. About the structure:
Compare a) the first lines, b) the second lines and c) the last lines in all the limericks. Can you find any common elements?
What is the function a) of the first two lines, b) of lines 3 and 4, c) of the closing line? Is this true of all the limericks?
6. Let's now consider the contents.
What elements of nonsense can you find in the Old Man with a beard, in the Old Person of Putney and in the Young Person of Crete?
7. On the next page there are two limericks whose lines are given in scrambled order. Can you work out what their original structure was?
8. Now it's your turn to write a limerick. Make sure you respect all the typical patterns and provide a drawing for it as well.

Worksheet

2. There was an Old Man with a beard
There was an Old Person of Putney
There was an Old Person of Wilts
There was a Young Person of Crete
There was an Old Person of Chili
There was a Young Lady of Norway
There was an Old Person of Wick

Have all built their nests in my beard
That romantic Old Person of Putney
That elegant Person of Wilts
That ombliferous Person of Crete
That imprudent Old Person of Chili
This courageous Young Lady of Norway
That laconic Old Person of Wick

Four Larks and a Wren
Within sight of the sea
And daffy-down-dillies
Spickle-speckled with black
Eating apples and pears
She exclaimed, ‘What of that?’
And he said nothing more

7. Put the lines in the right order.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Edward Lear's Limericks

Key to the Exercises

1. Count the stressed and the unstressed syllables in

u \ u u \ u u \
There was an Old Man with a beard
u \ u u \ u u \
u \ u u \
u \ u u \
u \ u u \ u u \

Is the stress pattern regular? **Yes**

Which lines have the same number of syllables? **The first two and the last, the 3rd and the 4th.**

Do stressed and unstressed syllables alternate regularly? **Yes, there are two unstressed syllables between every two stressed syllables.**

2. Compare the stress pattern in all the first and last lines. Are there any variations? **Yes, sometimes there's an extra unstressed syllable either at the beginning of the line or at the end, or even at both extremities.**

Compare the stress pattern in all the forth lines. Are there any variations? **Yes (same as above).**

What are your final considerations on the number of stressed and unstressed syllables? **The number stressed syllables is fixed: 3 in the 1st, 2nd and 5th lines and 2 in the 3rd and 4th lines. The number**

of unstressed syllables may vary: there are usually two between every two stressed syllables and one at the beginning of the line, but sometimes one unstressed syllable is added either at the beginning or at the end of the line.

3. Can you find a rhyme scheme in all the limericks? **Yes: A A B B A, with exactly the same word at the end of the 1st and the 5th lines.**

Is it the same for all of them? **Yes.**

4. Find elements in the limericks which show that the sound of the words is sometimes more important than the meaning they have.

a) **Constant use of rhyme.**

b) **Invented words: spickle, ombliferous.**

c) **Modified words, often to produce alliteration: daffy-down-dillies, spickle-speckled.**

d) **Onomatopoeic nonsense: Tick-a-tick, Chickabee.**

5. About the structure:

Compare a) the first lines, b) the second lines and c) the last lines in all the limericks. Can you find any common elements?

a) **Fixed beginning: There was.**

b) **The subject is a person (man, lady, person) and it is specified if it's an old or a young one.**

c) **The first line usually - although not always - ends with the mention of the place where the person comes from.**

- d) The second line begins with a relative pronoun (who, whose) and describes a peculiarity of the person.
- e) The last line is usually very similar to the first and ends with the same word or words. Very often it is introduced by a demonstrative (that, this), followed by an adjective which refers to the person (romantic, elegant, laconic, etc.) and, finally, by a new mention of the person and its provenience.

What is the function a) of the first two lines, b) of lines 3 and 4, c) of the closing line? Is this true of all the limericks?

- a) **1st line: to introduce the character.**
- b) **2nd line: to mention one peculiarity about him/her.**
- c) **3rd and 4th line: the contents vary, but very often they explain something the character did or something that happened to him/her.**
- d) **5th line: to repeat the description of the character, to give the idea the author is surprised by what the character has done, to give the poem a closed, circular structure. In the first limerick, however, the closing line is an expansion of the idea contained in lines 3 and 4.**

6. Let's now consider the contents.

What elements of nonsense can you find in the Old Man with a beard, in the Old Person of Putney and in the Young Person of Crete?

- a) **Birds don't build nests in beards, hens don't build nests at all.**
- b) **People don't eat spiders and in any case they don't roast them, a real food (chutney) is associated to something which is not edible (spiders), there's nothing romantic in eating spiders by the sea.**
- c) **People don't wear sacks, wearing a sack doesn't necessarily mean that one's toilet isn't complete, "spickle" and "ombliferous" are non-existing words.**

7. On the next page there are two limericks whose lines are given in scrambled order. Can you work out what their original structure was?

8. Now it's your turn to write a limerick. Make sure you respect all the typical patterns and provide a drawing for it as well.

Worksheet

2. There was an Old Man with a beard
 There was an Old Person of Putney
 There was an Old Person of Wilts
 There was a Young Person of Crete
 There was an Old Person of Chili
 There was a Young Lady of Norway
 There was an Old Person of Wick

u \ u u \ u u \
 u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u \ u u \ u u \
 u \ u u \ u u \
 u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u \ u u \ u u \

Have all built their nests in my beard
 That romantic Old Person of Putney
 That elegant Person of Wilts
 That ombliferous Person of Crete
 That imprudent Old Person of Chili
 This courageous Young Lady of Norway
 That laconic Old Person of Wick

u \ u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u \ u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u u \ u u \ u u \ u
 u u \ u u \ u u \

Four Larks and a Wren
 Within sight of the sea
 And daffy-down-dillies
 Spickle-speckled with black
 Eating apples and pears
 She exclaimed, 'What of that?'
 And he said nothing more

u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \
 u \ u u \ u
 u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \
 u u \ u u \

7. Put the lines in the right order.

**There was an Old Man of Kilkenny,
 Who never had more than a penny;
 He spent all that money
 In onions and honey,
 That wayward Old Man of Kilkenny.**

**There was a Young Lady of Lucca,
 Whose lovers completely forsook her;
 She ran up a tree
 And said, 'Fiddle-de-dee!'
 Which embarrassed the people of Lucca.**

Complete stress pattern of all the limericks

There was an Old Man with a beard

oOooOooO
oOooOooO
oOooO
oOooO
oOooOooO

There was a Young Lady of Norway

oOooOooOo
oOooOooOo
ooOooO
ooOooO
ooOooOooOo

There was an Old Person of Putney

oOooOooOo
oOooOooOo
ooOooO
ooOooO
ooOooOooOo

There was an Old Person of Wick

oOooOooO
oOooOooO
ooOooO
ooOooO
ooOooOooO

There was an Old Person of Wilts

oOooOooO
oOooOooO
oOooOo
oOooOo
oOooOooO

There was a Young Person of Crete

oOooOooO
oOooOooO
oOooO
ooOooO
ooOooOooO

There was an Old Person of Chili

oOooOooOo
oOooOooOo
oOooO
ooOooO
ooOooOooOo