The Dong with a Luminous Nose

POEM TEXT

When awful darkness and silence reign
Over the great Gromboolian plain,
Through the long, long wintry nights;—
When the angry breakers roar
As they beat on the rocky shore;—
When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—

Then, through the vast and gloomy dark,
There moves what seems a fiery spark,
A lonely spark with silvery rays
Piercing the coal-black night,—
A Meteor strange and bright:—
Hither and thither the vision strays,
A single lurid light.

Slowly it wanders,—pauses,—creeps,—
Anon it sparkles,—flashes and leaps;
And ever as onward it gleaming goes
A light on the Bong-tree stems it throws.
And those who watch at that midnight hour
From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,
Cry, as the wild light passes along,—
"The Dong!—the Dong!
"The wandering Dong through the forest goes!
"The Dong! the Dong!
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

Long years ago
The Dong was happy and gay,
Till he fell in love with a Jumbly Girl
Who came to those shores one day.
For the Jumblies came in a sieve, they did,—
Landing at eve near the Zemmery Fidd
Where the Oblong Oysters grow,
And the rocks are smooth and gray.
And all the woods and the valleys rang
With the Chorus they daily and nightly sang,—
"*Far and few, far and few,*
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue
And they went to sea in a sieve.

Happily, happily passed those days!
While the cheerful Jumblies staid;
They danced in circlets all night long,
To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong,
In moonlight, shine, or shade.
For day and night he was always there
By the side of the Jumbly Girl so fair,
With her sky-blue hands, and her sea-green hair.
Till the morning came of that hateful day
When the Jumblies sailed in their sieve away,
And the Dong was left on the cruel shore
Gazing—gazing for evermore,—
Ever keeping his weary eyes on
That pea-green sail on the far horizon,—
Singing the Jumbly Chorus still
As he sate all day on the grassy hill,—
"*Far and few, far and few,*
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue
And they went to sea in a sieve.

But when the sun was low in the West,
The Dong arose and said;
—"What little sense I once possessed
Has quite gone out of my head!"—
And since that day he wanders still
By lake and forest, marsh and hills,
Singing—"O somewhere, in valley or plain
"Might I find my Jumbly Girl again!
"For ever I'll seek by lake and shore
"Till I find my Jumbly Girl once more!"

Playing a pipe with silvery squeaks,
Since then his Jumbly Girl he seeks,
And because by night he could not see,
He gathered the bark of the Twangum Tree
On the flowery plain that grows.
And he wove him a wondrous Nose,—
A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!
Of vast proportions and painted red,
And tied with cords to the back of his head.

—In a hollow rounded space it ended
With a luminous Lamp within suspended,
All fenced about
With a bandage stout
To prevent the wind from blowing it out;—
And with holes all round to send the light,
In gleaming rays on the dismal night.

And now each night, and all night long,
Over those plains still roams the Dong;
And above the wail of the Chimp and Snipe
You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe
While ever he seeks, but seeks in vain
To meet with his Jumbly Girl again;
Lonely and wild—all night he goes,—
The Dong with a luminous Nose!
And all who watch at the midnight hour,
From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,
Cry, as they trace the Meteor bright,
Moving along through the dreary night,—
"This is the hour when forth he goes,
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!
"Yonder—over the plain he goes;
"He goes!
"He goes;
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

SUMMARY

When dreadful darkness and silence spread over the great Gromboolian plain in the long winter nights; when the angry waves break loudly against the rocky coast; when the thunderclouds loom gloomily over the high hills of the Chankly Bore:

On such terrible nights, what seems to be a glowing fleck of fire shooting out silvery beams of light moves through the blackness. It looks like a peculiar comet, wandering here and there, one harsh bright light all on its own.

It wanders slowly, stopping for a moment, creeping forward—then sparkling and jumping. Always moving forward, it casts its light over the trunks of the Bong-trees. The people who look out into the dark of these nights from their halls, their balconies, or their towers say, as the light goes past: "It's the Dong! The Dong is wandering through the forest! It's the Dong with the glowing nose!"

A long, long time ago, the Dong was a happy, cheerful guy—until he fell in love with one of the Jumblies, the adventurers who landed in his country one day. The Jumblies sailed in a sieve, landing as evening fell near the Zemmery Fidd, the place on the coast where the Oblong Oysters live among smooth, grey rocks. All day and all night, the forests and hills echoed the Jumblies' song: "The Jumblies live far, far away. They have green heads and blue hands, and they went sailing in a sieve."

Oh, what a happy time it was while the Jumblies stayed in the Dong's land. They danced in circles all night while the Dong played a melancholy tune on his pipe, weaving through moonlight and shadow. All day and all night, the Dong stayed near his beloved Jumbly Girl, whose hands were sky-blue and whose hair was sea-green. That's how it went until the terrible morning that the Jumblies got back in their sieve and sailed away, leaving the Dong alone on the shore, gazing ceaselessly at the pea-green sail of the sieve as it disappeared over the horizon. As he sat on the hill and watched, he kept on singing the Jumblies' song: "The Jumblies live far, far away. They have green heads and blue hands, and they went sailing in a sieve."

But when the sun began to set, the Dong finally got up and declared: "The little sanity I once had is gone!" Since that day, he wanders through the wilderness, singing: "Oh, somewhere, in the valleys or on the plains, I might one day find my Jumbly Girl again! I'll look for her by the lakes and the seashore until I find her!"

Playing his silvery pipe, he looks for his Jumbly Girl to this day. Since he couldn't see well enough to search at night, he collected the bark of the Twangum Tree that grows on the flowery plains. Out of this bark he wove himself a strange and wonderful nose. It was huge and painted bright red; he tied it around his face with strings. At its tip was a hollow sphere in which a glowing lantern hung, wrapped in a sturdy bandage to keep the wind from blowing it out. The nose was pierced with many holes to allow its light to illuminate the dark nights.

Now, every night, the Dong wanders over the plains. Through the squeals of chimpanzees and marsh birds, you can hear him playing his melancholy pipe while he searches fruitlessly for his Jumbly Girl. Lonely and crazed, the Dong with a Luminous Nose wanders all night long. And everyone who watches him from their halls, their balconies, or their tall towers says, as they watch the comet of his nose moving through the darkness: "This is the time when the Dong with the glowing nose goes wandering! Over there—across the plains he goes, the Dong with the glowing nose!"

THEMES

THE TRANSFORMATIVE PAIN OF HEARTBREAK

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose" is one of the most melancholy of Edward Lear's nonsense poems. It tells the tale

of the Dong, a creature who lives in a lonely, storm-wracked land of rocky shores and dark hills. The Dong falls in love with a visiting "Jumbly Girl," one of a crew of adventurous creatures who have sailed to the Dong's land in a sieve (that is, a strainer or a colander—full of holes, it's an unlikely vessel!). But their relationship is short-lived: she and her fellow Jumblies sail away again, and the Dong is left to console himself as best he can. Using bark and fire, he constructs a fabulous artificial nose that holds a glowing lantern; by its light, he wanders the night seeking his Jumbly Girl forever, until he's known as the legendary "Dong with a luminous Nose." Heartbreak and loneliness, in this poem, are transformative, leaving lasting marks on the Dong's mind, identity, and character.

When the Jumblies depart and the Dong is left all alone, he watches, devastated, as the "pea-green sail" of his Jumbly Girl's ship disappears over the "far horizon." His heart broken, the Dong at last declares that "What little sense I once possessed / Has quite gone out of my head." In other words, he's out of his wits with grief, a changed man.

He marks that inner change with an outer one. Though he's watched his beloved's "pea-green sail" disappearing over the "far horizon" and knows she's nowhere to be found in his own land, he behaves as if he might find her if only he searches hard enough, constructing a magnificent artificial nose-lantern with which to carry out his search. This nose—painted bright red, containing a "luminous lamp," and "tied with cords to the back of his head"—changes not just his appearance, but his identity itself. It's so impressive and distinctive a work that "those who watch" as the Dong wanders past start to think of him as "the Dong with a luminous Nose."

The Dong's broken heart, in other words, changes him inside and out, altering how he thinks, how he looks, how he behaves, and how the world perceives him. Grief and loneliness make him a marked man and an outsider—legendary, perhaps, but always standing apart from the people who cry "the wandering Dong through the forest goes!" as he passes.

Some readers have even seen the Dong's tale as a metaphor for the plight of the artist (and in particular the plight of Edward Lear himself, who suffered terribly from loneliness and unrequited love). The Dong's grief plants the unlikely seeds of creativity, making him into a notable nose-sculptor even as it cuts him off from the rest of the world. Alas, as Lear knew well, art might be a creative and even transformative response to heartbreak, but it's no cure.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-103

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

When awful darkness and silence reign
Over the great Gromboolian plain,
Through the long, long wintry nights;—
When the angry breakers roar
As they beat on the rocky shore;—
When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose" begins with a scene that might have come from a gothic novel. The speaker—more a narrator, really, an omniscient third-person storyteller—paints a picture of a landscape where "awful darkness and silence reign" over a "rocky shore" dashed by the "breakers" (the waves, that is). Nearby, thunderclouds gather over high hills. It's a murky, forbidding, and lonely vision. This world isn't just empty, it's *hostile*: the personified breakers are "angry," and the "Storm-clouds brood" as if preparing to make trouble.

This, the speaker tells readers, is the "great Gromboolian plain," near the "Hills of the Chankly Bore." Readers familiar with Edward Lear's work will know from these words alone that they're entering Lear's nonsense world: over and over again, his poems visited these peculiar invented places, whose names are as savory as their landscapes are inhospitable.

Just listen to way the alliterative /gr/ of "great Gromboolian" knocks against its round /oo/, or consider how the mere sound of the words "Chankly Bore' conjures up sharp, chalky, desolate rock. This delight in evocative sound—using the music of language to conjure meaning and atmosphere out of nonsense—is a hallmark of Lear's poetry.

So is a responsive, flexible form. Notice that there's no steady pattern of meter or rhyme here:

- Lear uses accentual meter—that is, lines that use a certain number of beats, but don't stick to a regular metrical foot like the iamb or the trochee.
- In this stanza, he dances between lines with three beats (as in "When the angry breakers roar") and lines with four beats (as in "When awful darkness and silence reign"), creating a surging, unpredictable rhythm that swells and falls like the wind.
- Always rhythmic and musical, the poem's meter will change shape to suit the unfolding drama.

And drama does seem to be on the way. This whole first moody stanza, readers gather, is a kind of drumroll or overture, preparing the audience for the story to come. Listen to the ominous anaphora in these first lines:

When awful darkness and silence reign

Over the great Gromboolian plain,
Through the long, long wintry nights;—
When the angry breakers roar
As they beat on the rocky shore;—
When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—

All those "when"s make it clear that *something is about to happen* against this grim backdrop.

LINES 8-14

Then, through the vast and gloomy dark,
There moves what seems a fiery spark,
A lonely spark with silvery rays
Piercing the coal-black night,—
A Meteor strange and bright:—
Hither and thither the vision strays,
A single lurid light.

The first stanza painted a suspenseful picture of the "awful darkness and silence" of a strange country. Against the "vast and gloomy dark," now, "what seems a fiery spark" appears.

Spend a moment with the imagery around that spark:

Then, through the vast and gloomy dark,
There moves what seems a fiery spark,
A lonely spark with silvery rays
Piercing the coal-black night,—

The speaker's repetitions here feel like a double-take. Perhaps this spark isn't so "fiery" as it appears at first glance: on a second look, it's "lonely" and "silvery," solitary and cool rather than powerfully blazing. But it's still strong enough to "pierc[e] the coal-black night" like a "Meteor." It even seems "lurid," harsh against the darkness.

All these descriptions suggest there's something both intense and piteous about this light. It's the single point of brightness in the "awful darkness and silence," so it stands out in powerful contrast. But it's also aimless and isolated, wandering "hither and thither," all alone.

Notice Lear's rhymes, which do as much as his meter to shape the poem's rhythm and drama. The pattern of rhyme in this stanza runs like this:

AABCCBC

The light first appears in a striking couplet that rhymes "dark" and "spark"—emphasizing the contrast between the two. Then, as the light wanders, so do the rhymes, meandering back and forth between B and C rhymes. The C couplet in the middle—"night" and "bright," another juxtaposition between the spark's glow and the night's darkness—slows the poem down a little; it's as if the narrator and the reader stop together to peer at this peculiar "Meteor," wondering what on earth it could be.

LINES 15-25

Slowly it wanders,—pauses,—creeps,—
Anon it sparkles,—flashes and leaps;
And ever as onward it gleaming goes
A light on the Bong-tree stems it throws.
And those who watch at that midnight hour
From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,
Cry, as the wild light passes along,—
"The Dong!—the Dong!
"The wandering Dong through the forest goes!
"The Dong! the Dong!
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

The speaker looks on now as the "lonely spark" wanders to and fro. Listen to the caesurae here:

Slowly it wanders,— || pauses,— || creeps,—
Anon it sparkles,— || flashes and leaps;

Those strong, suspenseful pauses evoke the light's erratic motion. A moment later, the speaker brings this vision even more vividly to life, describing the way the spark throws "a light on the Bong-tree stems'—words that paint a picture of a beam of light sliding across the trunks of a dark forest, wriggling over the irregular terrain. (They also invite readers to imagine a tree like none they've ever seen: what, precisely, does a "Bong-tree" look like? Perhaps the roundness of the word suggests a smooth, rotund trunk...)

Now, it transpires that the speaker and the reader aren't the only ones watching this strange phenomenon. There's also a crowd of "those who watch," all apparently from high-up and rather elegant lodgings: the inhabitants of "Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower" look down on the stormy plains and woods below to observe the light.

They, unlike the reader, know exactly where this "fiery spark" is coming from. As it passes, they cry:

"The Dong!—the Dong!
"The wandering Dong through the forest goes!
"The Dong! the Dong!
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

This, then, is the "Dong with a luminous Nose" who gives the poem its title. The way the watchers cry his name suggest he's a legendary figure—and the high drama of their repetitions lets readers know that this is the big reveal the poem has been preparing them for. His name rings out into the dark like the tolling of a bell. (And to this poem's first readers, that's *all* his name would have sounded like: the word "dong" didn't pick up its modern slang connotations until decades after Lear wrote this poem.)

Besides being a legend, the Dong is an outsider, quite literally.

Wandering through the storm, he's set apart from "those who watch," safe in their lofty homes; apparently, the Dong isn't the kind of guy you'd think to invite out of the weather.

Now, the speaker—who has already taken the removed, dramatic tone of a storyteller—will tell the tale of exactly how the Dong came to wander the "great Gromboolian plain" and the "Hills of the Chankly Bore" all alone.

LINES 26-39

Long years ago
The Dong was happy and gay,
Till he fell in love with a Jumbly Girl
Who came to those shores one day.
For the Jumblies came in a sieve, they did,—
Landing at eve near the Zemmery Fidd
Where the Oblong Oysters grow,
And the rocks are smooth and gray.
And all the woods and the valleys rang
With the Chorus they daily and nightly sang,—
"
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue
And they went to sea in a sieve.

The Dong, the speaker goes on, was once quite a different fellow, "happy and gay." The beginning of the end of his happiness came when the Jumblies landed on his shores—among them a Jumbly Girl with whom the Dong would fall in love.

The Jumblies come as a pleasant surprise to the Dong; to some readers, they might be curiously familiar. They're the seafaring heroes of Lear's earlier poem "The Jumblies," in which a little contingent of these green-headed, blue-handed people go "to sea in a sieve" (that is, a strainer or colander—not the most obviously seaworthy vessel) against the advice of their friends and family. Defiant and carefree, the Jumblies make a successful voyage in spite of the naysayers, visiting the "Torrible Zone" and—funnily enough—the "Hills of the Chankly Bore."

This poem, then, must recount an episode from the Jumblies' voyages. Lear doesn't just allude to the earlier poem, he quotes it: the declaration that the Jumblies sailed "in a sieve, they did" and the Jumblies' song (the lines beginning "far and few, far and few") come straight from "The Jumblies."

Already, though, the tone here is different. "The Jumblies" is a poem about good fellowship and the triumph of nonsense over sense. Readers know, however, that this poem won't end in triumph for the "wandering Dong."

In this stanza, though, the Jumblies bring the Dong a new lease on life. They land on what sounds like by far the most hospitable part of the Dong's land: the "Zemmery Fidd," a gentle place where "the rocks are smooth and gray" (rather than craggy and gloomy) and the "Oblong Oysters grow." They're so pleased with their successful voyage that, day and night, they sing a song of themselves:

> "*Far and few, far and few,*
> *Are the lands where the Jumblies live;*
> *Their heads are green, and their hands are blue*
> *And they went to sea in a sieve.*"

Though the Jumblies sing in triumph, there's something more haunting than jubilant about their song. The swaying rhythm of the words "far and few, far and few" and the soft /l/, /h/, and /s/ alliteration makes their chant sound more like distant waves than a cheery shanty. There's a touch of mystery and melancholy even here.

It's worth noting, too, that the song Lear puts in the Jumblies' mouths here isn't theirs in their original poem. Rather, it's a refrain that that poem's *speaker* returns and returns to. Here, the crowing Jumblies seem aware of their own legendary status as the crew who "went to sea in a sieve."

LINES 40-47

Happily, happily passed those days!
While the cheerful Jumblies staid;
They danced in circlets all night long,
To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong,
In moonlight, shine, or shade.
For day and night he was always there
By the side of the Jumbly Girl so fair,
With her sky-blue hands, and her sea-green hair.

The Jumblies' arrival was a time of joy for the Dong: "Happily, happily passed those days!" says the narrator, with a nostalgic moment of epizeuxis that makes it sound as if the narrator is shaking their head over "the days that are no more," as Lear's friend Tennyson once put it. While the Jumblies were around, life was a nonstop party:

> They danced in circlets all night long,
> To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong,
> In moonlight, shine, or shade.

Notice how Lear's language here conjures up a scene that's a little wistful and delicate even as it's giddy. The Jumblies dance, not in plain old "circles," but in "circlets," a word that suggests a dainty, almost fragile pattern of footwork. And they dance to the music of the "lively Dong"—but he plays that music on a "plaintive pipe," an instrument that seems to be lamenting even as it celebrates.

All this foreshadowing of sadness and transience is lost on the Dong: he's too much in love with his Jumbly Girl (and, readers suspect, too happy simply to have company) to feel anything

but joy. The Jumblies are always singing about how their "heads are green, and their hands are blue"—but looking lovingly on his Jumbly Girl, the Dong observes her particular tints of "sky-blue" and "sea-green."

Those colors strike a contrast with what we've seen of the Dong's landscape so far. Up until this point, the great Gromboolian plain, the hills of the Chankly Bore, and even the comparatively mild Zemmery Fidd have been painted in shades of "coal-black," grey, and stark white. The gentle, natural sky-blue and sea-green of the Jumbly Girl's hands and hair offers a vision of a world in *color*: it's as if, when he's beside his Jumbly Girl, the Dong is stepping into Oz.

LINES 48-59

Till the morning came of that hateful day
When the Jumblies sailed in their sieve away,
And the Dong was left on the cruel shore
Gazing—gazing for evermore,—
Ever keeping his weary eyes on
That pea-green sail on the far horizon,—
Singing the Jumbly Chorus still
As he sate all day on the grassy hill,—
"

Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue
And they went to sea in a sieve.

Inevitably, the Dong's happiness among the Jumblies can't last. One "hateful day," the Jumblies get back in their sieve and sail off again—apparently without even saying goodbye. The poor Dong is "left on the cruel shore":

> Gazing— || gazing for evermore,—

Readers can feel the longing in that drawn-out dash of a caesura. The Dong can do nothing but keep "his weary eyes on / That pea-green sail on the far horizon," a last glimpse of color and life. (Even in the midst of this tragedy, readers might take a moment to relish that "eyes on" / "horizon" rhyme.)

Bewildered and heartbroken, the Dong goes on repeating the Jumblies' song to himself—and in his mouth, its sadness comes into focus. If the "lands where the Jumblies live" are "far and few, far and few," then it seems very likely he'll never see his friends (or his beloved Jumbly Girl) again.

Notice everything that the speaker *doesn't* describe in these lines—and how those gaps deepen the story's poignancy. There's no scene of parting between the Jumblies and the Dong: for all that readers know, they up and left without even saying goodbye. And there's not the slightest hint of how the Jumbly Girl felt about the Dong—though one gets the sense she can't have returned his love, if she could simply get back into her sieve and sail away.

All these missing pieces make the Dong's empty life ring even more hollow. Truly he seems to have nothing now: only the words of a song and the last glimpse of a "pea-green sail" as it vanishes over the horizon.

LINES 60-69

But when the sun was low in the West,
The Dong arose and said;
—"What little sense I once possessed
Has quite gone out of my head!"—
And since that day he wanders still
By lake and forest, marsh and hills,
Singing—"O somewhere, in valley or plain
"Might I find my Jumbly Girl again!
"For ever I'll seek by lake and shore
"Till I find my Jumbly Girl once more!"

Left all alone with nothing, the Dong sits all day long on the hillside, watching the spot where the Jumblies' sieve-ship disappeared. At sunset, he at last gets to his feet and speaks the first words of his own readers have heard him say:

> —"What little sense I once possessed
> Has quite gone out of my head!"—

The Dong declares, in other words, that he's been driven mad with grief. It's a curiously *sensible* way to say so, though: it's almost as if the Dong is making the considered decision that madness is the only reasonable response to pain and loneliness this great.

This declaration, at any rate, marks the beginning of his new life. "Since that day," the speaker somberly says, "he wanders still," endlessly traversing the dark wildernesses, just as readers saw him at the beginning of the poem.

As he goes, the Dong sings a song of hope to himself, telling himself over and over that, if he quests for long enough, he might "find [his] Jumbly Girl again." Just a moment ago, remember, readers saw the Dong watching the Jumblies disappear over the "far horizon" to the lands—"far and few"—where they live. If he's seeking his Jumbly Girl on this side of the water, he seems likely to be in for disappointment: this is a Quixotic quest, an impossible journey.

That very impossibility captures something important about the Dong's emotional state. He's a guy forever heartbrokenly seeking something he can't find. Perhaps that was true even when the Jumblies were around: remember, there's not one flicker of a suggestion that the Jumbly Girl loved him back.

Notice, too, that the Dong *sings* as he goes. Once, he played his "plaintive pipe" for the Jumblies to dance to; now, he makes music all on his own. Perhaps music-making is one of the only small solaces left for a Dong with a broken heart. Listen to his song:

[...] "O somewhere, in valley or plain
"Might I find my Jumbly Girl again!
"For ever I'll seek by lake and shore
"Till I find my Jumbly Girl once more!"

The parallelism there always brings the Dong back to his Jumbly Girl in verse, if not in life.

LINES 70-76

Playing a pipe with silvery squeaks,
Since then his Jumbly Girl he seeks,
And because by night he could not see,
He gathered the bark of the Twangum Tree
On the flowery plain that grows.
And he wove him a wondrous Nose,—
A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!

Wandering the woods, "playing a pipe with silvery squeaks," the Dong has become the figure readers met at the beginning of the poem—almost. Now, at last, the narrator reveals how he became "the Dong with a luminous Nose."

At first, it seems, this was a matter of mere nonsense practicality. Because the Dong couldn't see to search for his Jumbly Girl by night, he "wove him a wondrous Nose" to wear—as one does! This nose, fitted out with a lamp, will become his guiding light.

But before learning more of this wondrous Nose's construction and design, consider its origins. The Dong *weaves* it from "the bark of the Twangum Tree" which grows on "the flowery plain": this is a nose made of living material, and it comes from one of the few pleasant-sounding places in the Dong's land. There's something lively and creative about this nose: in response to heartbreak, the Dong becomes an artist.

Readers might well pause to wonder: why a nose? Symbolically speaking, the Dong's majestic prosthetic might suggest instinct and searching (consider a dog's sniffing power, or what it means to "follow your nose"). But he won't use it for smelling. Instead, as readers will soon see, he'll use it for light. Perhaps it even *impedes* his sense of smell, strapped over his real nose as it is. In turning his nose into a beacon rather than a sniffer, the Dong might be blocking off his nose to spite his reason: he wants to believe that he can find his Jumbly Girl again, even if a person who could smell which way the wind was blowing would admit it's unlikely.

What's certain is that, with an artificial nose on, the Dong will be a marked man. His artwork shows that what's happened to him has changed him, making his heartbreak visible—as plain as the nose on his face.

LINES 77-85

Of vast proportions and painted red,
And tied with cords to the back of his head.
—In a hollow rounded space it ended
With a luminous Lamp within suspended,
All fenced about
With a bandage stout
To prevent the wind from blowing it out;—
And with holes all round to send the light,
In gleaming rays on the dismal night.

The Dong's new nose isn't just a convenient lantern, but a mark of how the Dong has changed. You simply can't ignore this nose: it's "of vast proportions and painted red," imagery that sets it apart from both the stark black-and-grey landscape and the Jumblies' dreamy "sea-green," "pea-green," and "sky-blue." With this nose on, the Dong belongs to neither of those worlds.

What's more, the nose has a "hollow rounded space" at its tip. Inside that hollow hangs a "luminous Lamp," wrapped in a "bandage stout" to keep it safe from the wind, but "with holes all round" so that the light shines out "in gleaming rays on the dismal night." (Readers can see how Lear envisioned the nose in his illustration for this poem.) It serves a practical purpose, then, helping the Dong to search through the night—though, as we noted above, it might cut off his sense of smell even as it helps him with his sense of sight.

Massive, bright red, and bandaged, this nose looks both conspicuous and *injured*. It doesn't just emit a light for the Dong to search by, it artistically expresses his pain. By tying this nose "with cords to the back of his head," the Dong gives his feelings physical form and makes them part of his body.

Perhaps both the Dong's pain and his artistry set him apart, then. He's lonely not just because he misses his Jumbly Girl, but because he's declaring himself a lonely man, identifying himself to the world as one who will search forever for a person he doesn't seem likely to find. He's literally carrying a torch for his Jumbly Girl—but more than that, he's making that torch into his identity.

The rhyme scheme and meter in these lines announce the nose's arrival as dramatically as the nose announces the Dong's suffering. Almost all the lines here use four beats and travel in punchy couplets—except for this even punchier triplet:

All fenced about
With a bandage stout
To prevent the wind from blowing it out;—

The thumping two-beat lines that introduce the nose "all fenced about" with that bandage sound almost fierce, stressing that the Dong doesn't just create this nose, but defends it, making sure it'll be a permanent part of his life. As the nose is fenced about with a bandage, the Dong is fenced about with the nose.

LINES 86-93

And now each night, and all night long,
Over those plains still roams the Dong;

And above the wail of the Chimp and Snipe
You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe
While ever he seeks, but seeks in vain
To meet with his Jumbly Girl again;
Lonely and wild—all night he goes,—
The Dong with a luminous Nose!

At last, the poem returns to where it started. Now that readers know how and why the Dong got his luminous nose, the far-off vision of his wanderings feels not just strange, but poignant.

The language here circles back just as the plot does, with echoes and repetitions stressing how fruitless the Dong's search for his Jumbly Girl is. His "plaintive pipe" makes its silvery "squeak" once more, cutting across "the wail of the Chimp and Snipe" like the cry of a jungle animal itself. (Notice how Lear pairs these unlikely creatures, jungle ape and marsh bird, for the satisfying pop of their consonant /p/ sounds as much as for their weirdness.)

And, as the speaker says:

> [...] ever he seeks, but seeks in vain
> To meet with his Jumbly Girl again;

The diacope of "seeks" there evokes the Dong's persistence even as it reminds the reader that this persistence is all "in vain."

One more echo ties it all together:

> Lonely and wild—all night he goes,—
> The Dong with a luminous Nose!

Here, at last, the promise of the poem's opening is fulfilled: as the poem repeats the mysterious onlookers' words, readers at last understand what they meant. The journey of the "Dong with a luminous Nose" has made him into the legend readers first met back in the third stanza. Playing his plaintive pipe, wearing his nose, the Dong wandered then and wanders still. His heartbreak has permanently changed the shape of his life and his face alike.

LINES 94-103

And all who watch at the midnight hour,
From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,
Cry, as they trace the Meteor bright,
Moving along through the dreary night,—
"This is the hour when forth he goes,
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!
"Yonder—over the plain he goes;
"He goes!
"He goes;
"The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

The poem closes by returning to its beginning. Now, those who "watch at the midnight hour" from their high-up vantage points in "Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower" again cry:

> "This is the hour when forth he goes,
> "The Dong with a luminous Nose!
> "Yonder—over the plain he goes;
> "He goes!
> "He goes;
> "The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

Everything about this repetitive conclusion speaks of endless isolation and endless yearning for the Dong. No matter how far and wide he wanders, no matter how long he searches, he'll never find his Jumbly Girl—and those observers will never invite him inside. The poem's circular shape reflects his tormenting fate. "He goes! / He goes!"—and, driven by an unquenchable longing, he never stops.

The Dong's only enduring solace is his art. The "squeak of his plaintive pipe" is the lone relic from the days when he used to play music for the Jumbles to dance to—and its "silvery squeaks" echo the "silvery rays" of his "wondrous Nose." That nose, meanwhile, symbolically expresses all his feelings: he carries his pain, his hope, his love, his identity, and his otherness right there on his face. The nose's light is a beacon for him to navigate by and a sign of his presence. Readers might even see it as quietly defiant: unignorable, it declares that *he's still there.*

Perhaps, then, the "Dong with a luminous Nose" is an avatar of the nonsense poet, or even of nonsense poetry: his pain, his strangeness, his ridiculousness, his unconventionality, and his creativity go hand in hand. Absurd and poignant, musical and wandering, "lonely and wild," the Dong embraces his role as an outsider even as he seeks desperately an end to his loneliness.

SYMBOLS

THE LUMINOUS NOSE

The Dong's luminous nose carries all sorts of mysterious symbolic weight:

- In its unignorable bright-red, "lurid" bulbousness, it represents the Dong's heartbreak, which alters him so profoundly that his very appearance must change. (Some critics have also seen the Dong's nose as a phallic symbol, an image of frustrated and humiliating sexuality.)
- In its elegant artistry—the Dong carefully designs and weaves it—it's an image of art itself, creativity springing up in response to suffering.
- In its brightness, the nose's lamp suggests the Dong's persistent hope that he might find his Jumbly Girl again, as well as an image of his persistent love: he's literally carrying a torch for her!

- And in its *noseness*, it might symbolize instinct and the power to seek and find, as a dog's sniffer does. Note, though, that the Dong uses his nose as a lantern, not a—well—nose; perhaps he's even muting his own capacity to smell with his prosthesis. That could be part of the nose's meaning, too: the Dong chooses to go on seeking his Jumbly Girl rather than sniffing out the tragic unlikeliness of their reunion.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** ""The Dong with a luminous Nose!""
- **Lines 73-85:** "He gathered the bark of the Twangum Tree / On the flowery plain that grows. / And he wove him a wondrous Nose,— / A Nose as strange as a Nose could be! / Of vast proportions and painted red, / And tied with cords to the back of his head. / —In a hollow rounded space it ended / With a luminous Lamp within suspended, / All fenced about / With a bandage stout / To prevent the wind from blowing it out;— / And with holes all round to send the light, / In gleaming rays on the dismal night."
- **Line 93:** "The Dong with a luminous Nose!"
- **Line 99:** ""The Dong with a luminous Nose!"
- **Line 103:** ""The Dong with a luminous Nose!""

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Lear creates his atmospheric nonsense land both through sound and imagery. The rattly, grumbly sounds of place names like the "Chankly Bore" and the "great Gromboolian plain" suggest a stark, rocky landscape—an impression that Lear underscores when he describes the scene. "Angry breakers roar / As they beat on the rocky shore," "Storm-clouds brood" over the hills, and an "awful darkness and silence" hangs over it all; this is an unhappy, forbidding landscape.

In the "vast and gloomy dark" of this place, the Dong's luminous nose thus stands out, its light a "lonely spark with silvery rays" that shoot through the "coal-black night." As his nose-lamp "sparkles,—flashes and leaps," it strikes a hopeful contrast with all that darkness—though it's also "lurid" and harsh, reflecting the tragic madness in the Dong's futile quest.

Against this backdrop of brooding shadows and sharp silvery light, the Jumblies offer a brief, poignant flash of color. As they often sing of themselves, "Their heads are green and their hands are blue"—or, as the Dong observes of his beloved Jumbly Girl, "sea-green" and "sky-blue," colors that evoke a happier, livelier natural world than the stormy, rocky one the Dong inhabits. Alas, a flash of a "pea-green sail" is the last colorful thing the Dong sees as the Jumblies leave his land. Perhaps a longing for this lost color and light shapes the design of the Dong's nose. "Of vast proportions and painted red," the nose is the antithesis of all the shapeless, lumpen darkness the Dong wanders through; its brightness is both sad and defiant.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When awful darkness and silence reign"
- **Lines 4-5:** "When the angry breakers roar / As they beat on the rocky shore;—"
- **Lines 6-7:** "When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights / Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—"
- **Lines 8-14:** "Then, through the vast and gloomy dark, / There moves what seems a fiery spark, / A lonely spark with silvery rays / Piercing the coal-black night,— / A Meteor strange and bright:— / Hither and thither the vision strays, / A single lurid light."
- **Lines 15-18:** "Slowly it wanders,—pauses,—creeps,— / Anon it sparkles,—flashes and leaps; / And ever as onward it gleaming goes / A light on the Bong-tree stems it throws."
- **Line 33:** "And the rocks are smooth and gray."
- **Line 38:** "Their heads are green, and their hands are blue"
- **Line 47:** "With her sky-blue hands, and her sea-green hair."
- **Line 53:** "That pea-green sail on the far horizon,—"
- **Line 58:** "Their heads are green, and their hands are blue"
- **Line 70:** "Playing a pipe with silvery squeaks,"
- **Lines 77-85:** "Of vast proportions and painted red, / And tied with cords to the back of his head. / —In a hollow rounded space it ended / With a luminous Lamp within suspended, / All fenced about / With a bandage stout / To prevent the wind from blowing it out;— / And with holes all round to send the light, / In gleaming rays on the dismal night."
- **Lines 88-89:** "And above the wail of the Chimp and Snipe / You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe"

REPETITION

Repetitions shape this poem's mood, evoking the poor Dong's endless wandering and setting a sometimes-suspenseful, sometimes-wistful tone.

Listen to the anaphora and epizeuxis in the first stanza, for instance:

> When awful darkness and silence reign
> Over the great Gromboolian plain,
> Through the long, long wintry nights;—
> When the angry breakers roar
> As they beat on the rocky shore;—
> When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
> Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—

All those "When"s work like the overture to a play, setting an ominous, atmospheric tone and ratcheting up the suspense. This lead-up invites readers to wonder what exactly happens on the dark and stormy nights these lines describe. The moody epizeuxis of "long, long wintry nights," meanwhile, suggests that those nights feel almost endless.

When the Dong puts in his first mysterious appearance, meanwhile, it's as:

> [...] what seems a fiery spark,
> A lonely spark with silvery rays

The diacope here feels like a double-take, as if the speaker first glimpses that spark in the darkness, then looks closer: *a spark—yes, a spark!*

Only in the third stanza is the Dong at last introduced by name. Anonymous watchers who peer from "Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower" cry:

> "The Dong!—the Dong!
> "The wandering Dong through the forest goes!
> "The Dong! the Dong!
> "The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

The Dong, these lines show, has become a legendary figure: all those repetitions of his name make it sound as if the word of his presence passes from person to person across a whole landscape. This language—and the mention of those who watch from "Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower"—will return at the end of the poem, suggesting that the Dong will wander the land forever, an eternal outsider, observed from a distance.

Repetitions also capture the Dong's sadness when the Jumblies sail away: all alone, he sings to himself, repeating the song the Jumblies used to sing while he played his "plaintive pipe." The words "Far and few, far and few / Are the lands where the Jumblies live" takes on a new wistfulness when the Dong is singing them alone.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When"
- **Line 3:** "long, long"
- **Line 4:** "When"
- **Line 6:** "When"
- **Line 9:** "spark"
- **Line 10:** "spark"
- **Lines 19-20:** "And those who watch at that midnight hour / From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,"
- **Line 22:** ""The Dong!—the Dong!"
- **Lines 24-25:** ""The Dong! the Dong! / "The Dong with a luminous Nose!""
- **Lines 36-39:** "" / Far and few, far and few, / Are the lands where the Jumblies live; / Their heads are green, and their hands are blue / And they went to sea in a sieve."
- **Line 40:** "Happily, happily"
- **Line 43:** "plaintive pipe"
- **Lines 56-59:** "" / Far and few, far and few, / Are the lands where the Jumblies live; / Their heads are green, and their hands are blue / And they went to sea in a sieve."
- **Line 67:** "find my Jumbly Girl"
- **Line 69:** "find my Jumbly Girl"
- **Line 70:** "silvery squeaks"
- **Lines 75-76:** "a wondrous Nose,— / A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!"
- **Line 89:** "plaintive pipe"
- **Lines 94-95:** "And all who watch at the midnight hour, / From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,"
- **Line 99:** ""The Dong with a luminous Nose!"
- **Lines 101-103:** ""He goes! / "He goes; / "The Dong with a luminous Nose!""

CAESURA

Moody caesurae help to shape the poem's tone: breaks in the lines work like musical notation, altering the poem's pace (and thus its mood). The effect is especially significant because Lear doesn't stick to a regular meter here. Caesurae thus play an especially big part in shaping the poem's rhythm.

For instance, listen to what happens in these lines:

> Slowly it wanders,—|| pauses,—|| creeps,—
> Anon it sparkles,—|| flashes and leaps;

The dashes here evoke the halting, wandering movement of the mysterious light as it travels through the woods—and the suspense the people watching "from Hall or Terrace" feel as they wait to see what the Dong will do next. The same effect appears when those nameless watchers cry his name: "The Dong! — || the Dong!"

Elsewhere, caesurae create swinging motion—as when the Jumblies sing:

> "Far and few, || far and few,
> Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
> Their heads are green, || and their hands are blue
> And they went to sea in a sieve.

The commas there create a back-and-forth, tidal rhythm that suits the Jumblies' seafaring song. More poignantly, when the Jumblies take to sea again and leave the Dong behind, he's left "Gazing— || gazing for evermore," the dash drawing out that long, long gaze even further.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** “Then, through”
- **Line 15:** “wanders,—pauses,—creeps,—”
- **Line 16:** “sparkles,—flashes”
- **Line 20:** “Terrace, or”
- **Line 21:** “Cry, as”
- **Line 22:** “Dong!—the”
- **Line 24:** “Dong! the”
- **Line 36:** “few, far”
- **Line 38:** “green, and”
- **Line 47:** “hands, and”
- **Line 51:** “Gazing—gazing”
- **Line 56:** “few, far”
- **Line 58:** “green, and”
- **Line 92:** “wild—all”
- **Line 95:** “Terrace, or”
- **Line 96:** “Cry, as”
- **Line 100:** “Yonder—over”

ALLUSION

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose" alludes to Lear’s earlier poem "The Jumblies"; in fact, it's a sequel to it. "The Jumblies" begins with words the Jumblies themselves sing in this poem:

> Far and few, far and few,
> Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
> Their heads are green, and the hands are blue
> And they went to sea in a sieve.

The seafaring Jumblies are a cheerfully defiant bunch who sail off in their unlikely vessel in spite of the fact that all their friends and family at home warn them not to. In this, they're classic Lear protagonists. Many characters in Lear's nonsense poems do something daring, strange, or eccentric over the objections of a skeptical, cruel "them"—the voice of conventional society.

The Jumblies find nothing but success on their voyage: they ride out storms, pick up souvenirs (a "hive of silvery bees" and "forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree," for instance), and return from their journey to the "Hills of the Chankly Bore" as seasoned and happy travelers. In fact, those who told them not to leave turn around and declare that they themselves will go to sea in a sieve as soon as possible.

"The Jumblies" is Edward Lear in his jubilant mode, telling a tale of eccentricity triumphing over prudence. Returning to the same world in this poem (right down to the "hills of the Chankly Bore" and the Jumblies' crowing song of themselves), Lear treats the same kind of story in a very different way. The Dong, like the Jumblies, is an outsider. Unlike the Jumblies, though, he doesn’t have a jolly community to share his strangeness with—or at least, he doesn't after the Jumblies themselves leave, apparently without even saying goodbye.

By telling another (and sadder) tale set in the Jumblies' world, Lear explores the plight of a character who is *truly* an outsider. Belonging to a community of people who don't fit in with the wider world, this poem suggests, is a very different matter from being altogether alone.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-39:** “The Dong was happy and gay, / Till he fell in love with a Jumbly Girl / Who came to those shores one day. / For the Jumblies came in a sieve, they did,— / Landing at eve near the Zemmery Fidd / Where the Oblong Oysters grow, / And the rocks are smooth and gray. / And all the woods and the valleys rang / With the Chorus they daily and nightly sang,— / " / Far and few, far and few, / Are the lands where the Jumblies live; / Their heads are green, and their hands are blue / And they went to sea in a sieve.”
- **Lines 40-59:** “Happily, happily passed those days! / While the cheerful Jumblies staid; / They danced in circlets all night long, / To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong, / In moonlight, shine, or shade. / For day and night he was always there / By the side of the Jumbly Girl so fair, / With her sky-blue hands, and her sea-green hair. / Till the morning came of that hateful day / When the Jumblies sailed in their sieve away, / And the Dong was left on the cruel shore / Gazing—gazing for evermore,— / Ever keeping his weary eyes on / That pea-green sail on the far horizon,— / Singing the Jumbly Chorus still / As he sate all day on the grassy hill,— / " / Far and few, far and few, / Are the lands where the Jumblies live; / Their heads are green, and their hands are blue / And they went to sea in a sieve.”

ALLITERATION

Strong alliteration is all part of what makes Lear sound like Lear: alliterative sounds help to make his nonsense musical and atmospheric.

For instance, the grinding /gr/ sound of the “great Gromboolian plain” evokes a dark and dismal landscape before the speaker even gets around to describing it. And you can hear the "angry breakers" that "roar / As they beat on the rocky shore" growling in that alliterative /r/.

The “lurid light" the Dong's nose casts over the "Bong-tree stems," meanwhile, feels even more piercing and intense because of its repeated /l/ sounds.

Elsewhere, Lear’s alliteration is just plain euphonious, its beauty helping to create the poem’s melancholy atmosphere. Listen to the repeated sounds in the Jumblies’ song of themselves, for instance:

> "*Far and few, far and few,*
> *Are the lands where the Jumblies live;*

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue
And they went to sea in a sieve.

The paired, echoing /f/ sounds of "far and few," the gentle /l/ of "land" and "live," the soft /h/ of "heads" and "hands," and the sibilant /s/ of "sea" and "sieve" make the Jumblies' song sound strangely hushed and mysterious—less a shanty, more a whisper.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "great Gromboolian"
- **Line 4:** "roar"
- **Line 5:** "rocky"
- **Line 6:** "brood," "heights"
- **Line 7:** "Hills," "Bore"
- **Line 9:** "seems," "spark"
- **Line 10:** "spark," "silvery"
- **Line 14:** "lurid light"
- **Line 17:** "gleaming goes"
- **Line 20:** "Terrace," "Tower"
- **Line 32:** "grow"
- **Line 33:** "gray"
- **Line 36:** "Far," "few," "far," "few"
- **Line 37:** "lands," "live"
- **Line 38:** "heads," "hands"
- **Line 39:** "sea," "sieve"
- **Line 43:** "plaintive pipe"
- **Line 44:** "shine," "shade"
- **Line 47:** "sky," "hands," "sea," "hair"
- **Line 49:** "sailed," "sieve"
- **Line 54:** "Singing," "still"
- **Line 56:** "Far," "few," "far," "few"
- **Line 57:** "lands," "live"
- **Line 58:** "heads," "hands"
- **Line 59:** "sea," "sieve"
- **Line 70:** "Playing," "pipe," "silvery squeaks"
- **Line 73:** "Twangum Tree"
- **Line 75:** "wove," "wondrous"
- **Line 77:** "proportions," "painted"
- **Line 80:** "luminous Lamp"
- **Line 89:** "plaintive pipe"
- **Line 95:** "Terrace," "Tower"
- **Line 96:** "Meteor"
- **Line 97:** "Moving"

VOCABULARY

Awful (Line 1) - "Awful" here can mean both "awe-inspiring" and "dreadful."

The great Gromboolian plain (Line 2) - One of Lear's invented places. He often returned to the same imagined landscapes across poems.

Breakers (Line 4) - Waves as they hit the shore.

The Hills of the Chankly Bore (Line 7) - Another invented place.

Hither and thither (Line 13) - Here and there.

Lurid (Line 14) - Harshly bright.

Anon (Line 16) - Now or soon.

Bong-tree (Line 18) - A tree of Lear's own invention.

Gay (Line 27) - Cheerful.

Jumblies (Line 28, Line 30, Line 37, Line 41, Line 46, Line 49, Line 54, Line 57, Line 67, Line 69, Line 71, Line 91) - A green-headed, blue-handed people that Lear introduced in his earlier poem "The Jumblies." The Jumblies are an adventurous, seafaring crew who sail (improbably) in a sieve.

At eve (Line 31) - In the eveningtime.

Zemmery Fidd (Line 31) - Another invented place.

Staid (Line 41) - An alternate spelling of "stayed."

Plaintive (Line 43, Line 89) - Mournful, sorrowful.

Sate (Line 55) - An alternate spelling of "sat."

Twangum Tree (Line 73) - Another invented tree.

Stout (Line 82) - Sturdy, strong.

Dismal (Line 85) - Dark and dreary.

Snipe (Line 88) - A kind of marsh bird.

Yonder (Line 100) - Over there.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose" is one of Edward Lear's classic nonsense poems. That is, it's a fantastical poem set in an invented world, notable for its chewy, exuberant made-up words. While such poetry has a reputation for whimsy, Lear—the granddaddy of the form—often wrote the most melancholy of nonsense, as he does in this tale of the lonely Dong. (Please note that, when Lear wrote this poem, the word "Dong" didn't have any of its ruder modern connotations; the name might have made the poem's first readers think of the solemn sound of a tolling bell more than anything.)

Like a lot of Lear's longer nonsense verse, this poem uses a meandering shape of Lear's own invention. The poem's eight irregular stanzas range from 7 to 20 lines long, changing shape to suit the story's dramatic needs:

- The first two short stanzas, for instance, paint a sharp, suspenseful picture of a mysterious "lurid light" weaving through the darkness.
- Meanwhile, the more leisurely stanza at lines 40-59 takes its time to unfold the Dong's tragic history.

METER

This poem doesn't stick to any one metrical pattern. Instead, its lines dance around, changing shape to fit the story the speaker tells.

For instance, listen to how the stresses fall in the first stanza:

> When awful darkness and silence reign
> Over the great Gromboolian plain,
> Through the long, long wintry nights;—
> When the angry breakers roar
> As they beat on the rocky shore;—
> When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
> Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—

These lines are all written in accentual meter: that is, they keep to a certain number of beats per line, but use all kinds of different feet rather than sticking to just one (like the iamb or the trochee). Here, an unpredictable mixture of four-beat lines and three-beat lines creates an emphatic but uneasy rhythm, rather like the "angry breakers" rolling in against the "rocky shore."

Lear will use this flexible meter for dramatic effect at the end of the third stanza, when the onlookers who watch the Dong from their towers cry:

> "The Dong!—the Dong!
> "The wandering Dong through the forest goes!
> "The Dong! the Dong!
> "The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

The two-beat lines that introduce the Dong feel grand and solemn: it's as if his bell-like name is tolling out in the silence of the "great Gromboolian plain."

RHYME SCHEME

Because this poem uses an irregular stanza form, it doesn't have a predictable, mappable rhyme scheme—though it does use plenty of rhyme. A couple of repeated rhyme words—"Dong" and "nose"—reappear as a touchstone. But for the most part, Lear's lively rhymes shift shape to suit the part of the story he's telling.

For instance, listen to the rhymes in the first stanza:

AABCCBC

The rhymes here don't fall into a clear pattern. Instead, they unpredictably interweave, creating an uneasy, echoey effect that suits this eerie introduction to the Dong's world.

In the last stanza, meanwhile, Lear uses a long run of couplets that ends in a dramatic string of identical rhymes:

AABBCCDDEEFFDDDDDD

Those tense couplets work like a drumroll, leading up to that long, long stretch of D rhymes on "nose" and "goes"—a repetitive passage that mirrors the Dong's ceaseless, futile search for his Jumbly Girl.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker isn't part of the action. Rather, they're an omniscient narrator describing how the "Dong with a luminous Nose" came to wander the "great Gromboolian plain." Hovering over the scene, the speaker can move in close to hear the whispers of "those who watch" as the Dong makes his way past, observe from afar as the Dong's nose pulls a comet-like trail through the dark, and delve into the Dong's tragic past. This dramatic storyteller's voice makes the tale of the Dong feel hushed and somber: it's as if readers are listening to the speaker whispering on a cold winter night.

Readers might be tempted to interpret the Dong as Lear's self-portrait. Exuberant of schnoz himself, Lear suffered terribly from unrequited love and always felt like an outsider and an odd duck—not unlike his poem's hero.

SETTING

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose" is set in a nonsense world of Lear's own invention. Readers might find this strange world oddly familiar if they've read some of Lear's other poetry—most especially "The Jumblies," the tale to which this poem is a melancholy sequel. The "Hills of the Chankly Bore" put in their first appearance in that jauntier, more optimistic poem.

Lear writes of his imagined places with calm authority, trusting that the mere sounds of the words "Gromboolian," "Chankly Bore," and "Zemmery Fidd" will paint a picture of a strange and forbidding landscape. He describes a land of "long, long wintry nights" in which "Storm-clouds brood" over the barren countryside; if it weren't for the watchers who look on from an occasional "Hall" or "lofty Tower," the Dong's land would feel almost empty.

The landscape isn't totally bare, though. It grows abundant flora and fauna, from "Bong-tree[s]" to "Oblong Oysters" to the "Twangum Tree" from whose bark the Dong weaves his marvelous Nose. Those specific names might remind readers that Lear began his career as a zoological illustrator, paying careful Victorian attention to different species of parrot. His invented land has a certain biological precision.

The poem might be set in a nonsense-world, but that world is also atmospheric, rich, and physical. The image of the Dong's nose-lantern throwing "a light on the Bong-tree stems" as the Dong wanders past feels as vivid as if it were being played on a stage.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Edward Lear (1812-1888) was one of the great masters of 19th-century nonsense literature, a genre marked by witty wordplay, absurd humor, tales of the fantastical, and quietly anarchic rebellion against Victorian stuffiness. Though Lear initially made his living as a zoological painter (specializing in parrots) and a travel writer, his lasting reputation rests on his musical, melancholy light verse, especially his giddy and surreal limericks. Though Lear didn't invent the limerick, he popularized and perfected the form, most famously in *A Book of Nonsense* (1846).

Lear first published "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" in his 1877 collection *Laughable Lyrics*—one of his latest and richest collections of nonsense verse. Alongside such bittersweet poems as "The Pelican Chorus" and "The Pobble Who Has No Toes," the "Dong" expresses Lear's sorrow as well as his wit, telling a tale of loneliness and estrangement that draws on the eccentric poet's own lifelong sense of exile.

Lear's closest peer as a Victorian nonsense poet was Lewis Carroll, who wove "Jabberwocky," "The Walrus and the Carpenter," and other famous poems into his novel *Through the Looking-Glass* (published in 1871, the same year as Lear's *Nonsense Songs*). But the two kings of nonsense never met. Instead, Lear rubbed elbows with major Victorian figures connected with the Pre-Raphaelite circle, like the painter William Holman Hunt and the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (for some of whose poems Lear composed elegant musical arrangements). In the 20th century, Lear's work would influence everyone from W.H. Auden to Dr. Seuss.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Edward Lear led a life full of longing, habitually feeling that the happiness and comradery he craved lay just out of his reach (perhaps one of the reasons he responded to his friend Tennyson's wistful poetry so intensely). The youngest surviving child of 21 (!), Lear was raised by his doting sister Ann after their father lost most of his money and the family had to split up. While Lear loved Ann very much, he also felt abandoned by his parents, especially his mother. Like the Dong, he would spend much of his life wandering from place to place trying to find the loving closeness he hungered for.

For most of his life, Lear made a living as a landscape painter. (In fact, he once overheard a rude young man dismissing him as nothing but a "dirty landscape painter," a turn of phrase he gleefully appropriated and used to describe himself for the rest of his life.) He traveled widely across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, painting the scenery in Rome, Corfu, Luxor, and Jerusalem, among many other beautiful places.

During his adventures, he fell in (mostly) unrequited love with Franklin Lushington, a fellow Englishman abroad. The two men made a dreamy journey through Greece together, relishing the landscape: describing the spring flowers they delighted in that year, Lear wrote that "the whole earth is like a rich Turkey carpet."

But before long, Lushington withdrew, unable to match the sheer intensity of Lear's feelings. Lear spent long and fruitless years trying to recapture the closeness they'd briefly shared. The pair would remain friends all their lives, but that tantalizing friendship itself could be a kind of torment for Lear.

By the time Lear published "The Dong with a Luminous Nose," he'd undergone another serious romantic disappointment: a twice-declined proposal to Augusta Bethell, a younger woman he called "Gussie." As in the case of Lushington, the two remained friends even after Gussie turned Lear down; many of the people he cared for loved him, too, just not in quite the way he'd hoped.

In "The Jumblies," then, Lear made glorious nonsense from his joy in finding unconventional fellow-travelers in a staid and judgmental world. In "The Dong with a Luminous Nose," he lamented the fact that such joy always seemed to withdraw, one time or another.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Lear's life and work via the Edward Lear Society. (https://www.edwardlearsociety.org/biography/)
- Lear's Art — Admire some of Lear's artwork. Alongside his famous and excellent cartoons, he was a notable wildlife and landscape painter. (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2012/sep/20/edward-lear-200-years-in-pictures)
- Lear's Legacy — Read about a recent biography of Lear that describes his lasting influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/24/mr-lear-a-life-of-art-and-nonsense-review-jenny-uglow-honey-heartbreak-half-life)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to an atmospheric (and musical) performance of the poem by the great Ivor Cutler. (https://youtu.be/DqmpHPiMiDE)
- Lear's Drawings — See Lear's own rendition of the Dong and his luminous nose (and read a short appreciation of the poem by writer Sam Munson). (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/05/17/serious-nonsense/)
- Laughable Lyrics — See images from the 1877 collection in which this poem was first published.

(https://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/ll/index.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDWARD LEAR POEMS

- The Duck and the Kangaroo
- The Owl and the Pussy-Cat

HOW TO CITE

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