Sexual humor on Freud as expressed in limericks

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Abstract

A limerick is a popular five-line verse with a defined rhyme and rhythm. From over 6000 limericks scanned from six standard source books on limericks, 21 were identified as featuring Sigmund Freud, specifically by name. Limericks on Freud can be arbitrarily categorized into following subtypes: 1) Freud and his contemporaries; 2) Freud’s place of work; 3) Freudian ideas on sex; and 4) Case studies on Freudian themes. I conclude that Freud’s popularity among limerick poets cannot be solely attributed to his ideas and research themes on sexuality. Other reputed researchers on sexuality who were contemporaries of Freud such as Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Wilhelm Stekel, Magnus Hirschfeld, Iwan Bloch and Alfred Kinsey have not attracted equal attention among the limerick poets.

Introduction

A limerick is an anecdote in verse consisting of five lines with a defined rhyme and rhythm. It is predominantly anapestic, with a stress pattern 3/3/2/2/3 and rhyming a/a/b/b/a (Frye et al. 1985: 260). There is a well known example which illustrates its form as follows:

The limerick’s an art form complex
whose contents run chiefly to sex
It’s famous for virgins
and masculine urgins
and vulgar erotic effects

Another characteristic which is prominently linked to most limericks is the anonymity of its author. The popularity of limerick verse is due to its
brevity, metrical perfection and a quick turn of wit in the last line. 1996 marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of *A Book of Nonsense* authored by Edward Lear (1812–1888), which popularized the limerick to a wider audience. Limericks serve multiple functions in scientific literature. These include their uses:

(a) in explaining scientific principles in a humorous and unforgettable style (Baring-Gould 1979: 5–6; Parrott 1984: 66; Reese 1987a: 48, and 1987b: 48);
(b) as case studies in medical journals (Rankin 1976: 167);
(c) as baits (limerick competitions) to elicit reader participation (Anon 1975: 735); and
(d) for sheer entertainment (Jones 1995: 24).

However, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no reports on the analyses of limericks composed on a scientist.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is considered as the father figure of psychoanalysis and an authority on wit and humor. He coined the very term ‘psychoanalysis’ in 1896. Thus 1996 also marked the centenary of the entry of the word ‘psychoanalysis’ into the science lexicon, as well as the 140th anniversary of his birth.

In this paper, I present a survey of the limericks which feature Freud in a humorous manner and explore the possible reason why, among all scientists, he is represented prominently in this verse-form.

**Method**

Limericks which feature Freud (specifically by name) were collected from six standard source books of limericks (Table 1). From over 6000 limericks, 21 were identified as describing themes related to Freud’s contributions to the studies on sexual behavior. A couple of these limericks contain sexually explicit words, which is not unusual for this verse-form.

**Analysis**

Limericks on Freud can be arbitrarily categorized into following subtypes.

1. Freud and his contemporaries
2. Freud’s place of work
Table 1. Distribution of Freud-related limericks in limerick source books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Editor of source book and year of publication</th>
<th>Total number of limericks</th>
<th>Number of limericks on Freud</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G. Legman (1980)</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. O. Parrott (1984)</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. S. Baring-Gould (1979)</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Cerf (1962)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Douglas (1967)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td>6100</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Freudian ideas on sex
4. Case studies on Freudian themes.

Examples of each of these subtypes are illustrated below.

1. *Freud and his contemporaries*

Some limericks have compared Freud with a few of his illustrious contemporaries who contributed to the disciplines of psychology, sexology and philosophy. Richard Krafft-Ebing, Wilhelm Stekel, Carl Gustav Jung, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Herbert McLuhan are some who have been linked with Freud in such limericks.

Withdrawal, according to Freud,
is a very good thing to avoid
If practiced each day
your balls will decay
to the size of a small adenoid

The sequel to this limerick states,

Freud's opinion, said old Dr. Stekel,
isn't worth a confederate shekel
Withdrawal is fun —
but beware lest the Sun
should cause the withdrawn parts to freckle.

There was a young girl of East Anglia
whose loins were a tangle of ganglia
Her mind was a webbing
of Freud and Krafft-Ebing
and all sorts of other new-fanglia

There was a young man of Thames-Ditton
who found Sartre and Freud unbefittin’
While Marcuse and McLuhan
he felt were just doin’
What’s commonly known as bull-shittin’.

A psychiatrist fellow, quite Jung
asked his wife, “May I bugger your bung?”
and was so much annoyed
when he found her a-Freud,
He went out in the yard and ate dung.

A limerick which toasts to the revolution Freud made in opening a virgin
discipline at the end of the sexually-repressing reign of Queen Victoria
(1819–1901) is indeed a kicker.

Then last came Victoria Regina
whose reign was the best — never finer!
But alas, all the women
with frustrations were brimmin’,
until Freud delved the frigid vagina.

2. Freud’s place of work

About Vienna, where Freud spent his life time, a limerick has been
written, too.

Ah Vienna! the fortress of Freud,
where surgeons are never employed.
Where boys with soft hands
are provided with glands,
and two-fisted girls are de-boyed.

This could be in response to the fame of Vienna as the sex capital of
Europe in the nineteenth century. Figures published in a two-volume
study on prostitution by Josef Schrank in 1886, informs that in the
eighteen twenties, 20,000 prostitutes serviced the total population of
400,000 in Vienna — to a proportion of one girl to every seven men (Tannahill 1981: 357).

3. **Freudian ideas on sex**

Some limericks have focused on Freud’s ideas related to sex and how it has been understood or twisted by the commoners.

According to old Sigmund Freud
Life seldom is so well enjoyed
as in human coition
(in any position)
with the usual organs employed.

Sigmund Freud’s discussion of sex centers much around Oedipus Rex
a stupid young sucker
who turned mother fucker,
and placed quite a hex upon sex.

The young things who frequent picture-palaces
have no use for this psycho-analysis
And although Doctor Freud
is distinctively annoyed
They cling to their old-fashioned fallacies.

An early psychologist, Freud,
had the blue noses very anneud,
saying, “You cannot be rid
of the troublesome Id,
So it might just as well be enjoyed.”

One particular limerick, composed in a free-form (which runs into six lines, instead of the usually allotted five lines) humorously notes the relevance of masturbation as a means of birth control.

At the slightest provocation
We indulge in masturbation,
We all are ardent followers of Freud!
For the price of copulation
is the risk of population,
and dependents are a thing we must avoid.
Lastly, some limericks which can be grouped into a category on psychotic and/or neurotic patients depict the case studies on Freudian themes.

A dashing young fellow named Bream
every night had a juicy wet dream
His wife, quite annoyed
called a student of Freud,
who cured him — which really was mean.

A neurotic young girl from Natchez
wrote in weird Freudian snatches
Her doc was impressed
till she finally confessed
that she wrote with her cunt and burnt matches.

A young fellow discovered through Freud
that although of a penis devoid,
He could practice coitus
by eating a foetus,
and his parents were quite overjoyed.

Discussion

It is interesting to pose the question why Freud has been popular among the limerick poets. Table 2 provides a chronological synopsis of Freud’s contributions to the field of sexology. In 1896, when he was 40-years old, he introduced the term ‘psychoanalysis’ and for the following three decades, until 1925, contributed significantly to the development of this branch of human sexuality studies. Since limericks also largely deal with sexual themes, it is apparent that Freud is an obvious choice for exploration by limerick poets.

However, this cannot be the exclusive reason. Other researchers on sexology, who were contemporaries of Freud have not attracted equal attention among limerick poets. These include, Richard Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940), Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935), Iwan Bloch (1872–1922) and Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956). Among the 6100 limericks I scanned for this study, the names of Krafft-Ebing and Stekel appeared only in one limerick each (cited above). Ellis, Hirschfeld and Bloch have not been featured in any of
Sexual humor on Freud as expressed in limericks

Table 2. Brief chronology of Freud's contribution to sex research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Freud's contribution to sex research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>Birth at Freiberg, Moravia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Introduction of the term “psychoanalysis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Recognition of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Publication of <em>The Interpretation of Dreams</em>, with mention on the dominance of the ‘pleasure principle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality</em>, which traces the courses of development of the sexual instinct in humans from infancy to maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Introduction of case history ‘Little Hans, aged 5’, which becomes the first analysis of a child as related to infantile sexuality, Oedipus and castration complexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Revision of views on the sexual development of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Death in London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the limericks surveyed. One unflattering limerick on Kinsey, referring to the investigations made by him on penis measurements, does appear in one of the source books. This reads as follows:

There was an old phoney named Kinsey
whose ideas of fucking were flimsy
He knew how to measure
a penis for pleasure
but he came much too quick in a quim, see?

One can also agree with the observation of Haeberle (1982: 319) that though Freud's place in the history of sexology is secure, “As far as sexology proper is concerned, Freud was only a marginal figure.” This is because psychoanalysis is only one of the components of the vast territory mapped by the pioneers of sexology.

At this juncture, it is not inappropriate to refresh ourselves with Freud's impressions on how he came to open a hitherto unexplored field of research during the Victorian era of sexual repression. He had reminisced, “Psychoanalysis is my creation; for ten years I was the only person who concerned himself with it, and all the dissatisfaction which the new phenomenon aroused in my contemporaries has been poured out in the form of criticisms on my head” (Freud, as translated by Riviere 1966: 7). Freud continues further on how he struggled to establish his turf on a new territory at the extent of sacrificing his stature as a medical doctor:

I did not at first perceive the peculiar nature of what I had discovered. I unhesitatingly sacrificed my growing popularity as a doctor, and the increase in
attendance during my consulting hours, by making a systematic inquiry into the sexual factors involved in a causation of my patients' neuroses; and this brought me a great many new facts which finally confirmed my conviction of the practical importance of the sexual factor (Freud, as translated by Riviere 1966: 21).

Freud also has described how his initial exposition in 1896 on psychoanalysis with the title, ‘Zur Atiologie der Hysterie’ met with rejection by his peers, including that of Krafft-Ebing, who was his senior contemporary in the field of sexology. He states:

I innocently addressed a meeting of the Vienna Society for Psychiatry and Neurology with Krafft-Ebing in the chair, expecting that the material losses I had willingly undergone would be made up for by the interest and recognition of my colleagues. I treated my discoveries as ordinary contributions to science and hoped they would be received in the same spirit. But the silence which my communications met with, the void which formed itself about me, the hints that were conveyed to me, gradually made me realize that assertions on the part played by sexuality in the aetiology of the neuroses cannot count upon meeting with the same kind of treatment as other communications. (Freud, as translated by Riviere, 1966: 21)

It took 10 years for Freud’s ideas of psychoanalysis to be accepted into the domain of mainstream science. He noted:

In 1907 the situation changed all at once and contrary to all expectations. It appeared that psychoanalysis had unobtrusively awakened interest and gained friends, and that there were even some scientific workers who were ready to acknowledge it ... It has penetrated into the most distant lands and has everywhere not merely startled psychiatrists but commanded the attention of the educated public and of scientific workers in other fields.” (Freud, as translated by Riviere, 1966: 26–30)

Then in 1909, Freud with Carl Gustav Jung visited the United States to deliver lectures in German to a receptive audience at the Clark University, Massachusetts. About this experience, he had commented as follows:

To our great surprise, we found the members of that small but highly esteemed university for the study of education and philosophy so unprejudiced that they were acquainted with all the literature of psychoanalysis and had given it a place in their lectures to students. In prudish America it was possible, in academic circles at least, to discuss freely and scientifically everything that in ordinary life is regarded as objectionable. (Freud, as translated by Riviere, 1966: 31)

A concurrent and independent development could also be tracked in the transformation of limericks from the status of underground literature
into mainstream culture. With the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and the beginning of a new century, the sexual repression which characterized the Victorian era (1837–1901) also came to be relaxed. Thus, bawdy limericks which were popular in oral circulation found their way into print. In 1904, Stanton Vaughan published an anthology of limericks, *700 Limerick Lyrics: A Collection of Choice Humorous Versifications*, in New York. This collection has been annotated by Legman as “the largest polite collection of the 1900s, and venturing several semi-bawdy specimens” (Legman 1980: 585).

Freud became internationally recognized in the mid nineteen twenties. In December 1925, Freud wrote to his nephew Samuel stating “I am considered a celebrity. The Jews all over the world boast of my name pairing me with Einstein” (Gay 1988: 455). His biographer observes, “This boast was not his [Freud’s] invention; nor did the pairing come from Jews alone. Speaking at the opening ceremonies of Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925, the elderly English statesman Lord Balfour linked Freud to Bergson and Einstein as one of the three men, all Jews, who had had the greatest beneficial influence on modern thought” (Gay 1988: 455). Almost all the limericks on Freud post-date this international recognition. Thus it is appropriate to infer that Freud’s pre-eminent status as an icon of twentieth century science with interdisciplinary celebrity status among scientists and the public has much to do with his popularity among limerick poets.

Douglas (1967: 18) points out that Victorian era was the golden period of limericks. As mentioned in the introduction, Edward Lear’s 1846 book initiated a torrential flow of limericks. Cerf (1962: 11) records that “Nobody was more dismayed by this development than Edward Lear himself, who boarded a steamer and fled to Greece to escape the plague of limericks he had started.” Thus one can grasp why limericks (which mainly focus on sexual humor) thrived during the sexually-repressive regime of Queen Victoria. How does Freud, who authored the classic work *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* [Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious] in 1905, interpret this phenomenon? He states in this study that humor can be regarded as the highest form of defensive process against repression.

Humor is a means to gain pleasure despite the painful effects which disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this affective development, and takes its place. If we are in a situation which tempts us to liberate painful affects according to our habits, and motives then urges us to suppress these affects statu nascendi, we have the conditions for humor.” (Freud, as translated by Brill, 1993; 371)
Thus, one can infer that limericks created and enjoyed by the non-aristocratic masses during the prudish sexual sensitivities that characterized the Victorian era served a vital function as a defence against sexual repression. However, even in this century, until the 1960s, reputable publishers did not dare to publish a collection of limericks due to the then prevailing conservative sexual mores. The limericks on Freud reported in this study appeared in print only in the nineteen seventies and later.

One can wonder how Freud would have perceived his popularity among the limerick poets? His sardonic sense of humor was legendary. Even under Nazi harassment, when the authorities wanted a statement that they had not ill-treated him, he made the incomparable humorous insult, "Ich kann die Gestapo jedermann auf das beste empfehlen" i.e. 'I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to every one' (Gay 1988: 628) which cruised beyond the intellectual antenna of the dim-witted authorities. Therefore I conclude that Freud would have been delighted by the attention he has been paid by the limerick poets.

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Note

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