

# The Owl and the Pussy-Cat



## POEM TEXT

1 The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
 2 In a beautiful pea-green boat,  
 3 They took some honey, and plenty of money,  
 4 Wrapped up in a five-pound note.  
 5 The Owl looked up to the stars above,  
 6 And sang to a small guitar,  
 7 "O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,  
 8 What a beautiful Pussy you are,  
 9 You are,  
 10 You are!  
 11 What a beautiful Pussy you are!"

12 Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!  
 13 How charmingly sweet you sing!  
 14 O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
 15 But what shall we do for a ring?"  
 16 They sailed away, for a year and a day,  
 17 To the land where the Bong-Tree grows  
 18 And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood  
 19 With a ring at the end of his nose,  
 20 His nose,  
 21 His nose,  
 22 With a ring at the end of his nose.

23 "Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling  
 24 Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."  
 25 So they took it away, and were married next day  
 26 By the Turkey who lives on the hill.  
 27 They dined on mince, and slices of quince,  
 28 Which they ate with a runcible spoon;  
 29 And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,  
 30 They danced by the light of the moon,  
 31 The moon,  
 32 The moon,  
 33 They danced by the light of the moon.

guitar, gazed at the stars, and sang about how beautiful the cat was.

The cat praised the owl for being a sophisticated bird and a wonderful singer. Then the cat exclaimed that they should get married at once—in fact, they'd waited too long already—but wondered how they could find a wedding ring. The two creatures sailed off on a 366-day voyage to the country famous for its Bong-Tree. There, in the forest, they found a pig wearing a ring in his nose.

They asked the pig if he would sell them the ring for a small (twelve-pence) coin. He agreed, so they carried off the ring and had their wedding the following day. A turkey, who lived on the hill nearby, officiated. Afterward, the newlyweds ate mincemeat and sliced quince (an apple-like fruit) with a weird, whimsical utensil. They held hands and danced on the beach by moonlight.



## THEMES



### LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND HAPPINESS

One of the world's most popular children's poems, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" is a joyous celebration of love. Its heroes take a pleasure trip to sea, where the Owl woos the Pussy-Cat in song and the Pussy-Cat proposes marriage. After a further voyage, they buy a ring from an obliging Piggy-wig, get married with the help of a Turkey, dine on delicious foods, and dance in the moonlight. Apart from the long trip to obtain the ring, there are no roadblocks on the lovers' path to happiness: all is romance, luck, and fun. There's no conflict *between* the lovers, either, despite their differing species. When you're blissfully in love, the poem suggests, you feel totally in sync with your partner, and everything seems to go your way.

From the beginning of the poem to the end, the Owl and the Pussy-Cat are defined by their shared love. They're presented as a couple ("The Owl and the Pussy-Cat") from the title on, and the poem ends with their wedding reception. The dialogue between the two shows that they're deeply in love even before they take their pleasure trip to sea. The Owl calls the Pussy-cat "beautiful" and "my love"; the Pussy-cat not only proposes marriage but says they've waited too long to marry as is. The Owl doesn't even need to accept the proposal. They're completely on the same page and set out at once to find a ring.

Their total commitment to each other seems to bring them good luck: their relationship never faces any real obstacles. It's unclear what has made them "tarr[y]" or hesitate to get married, but whatever the issue was, it vanishes at the start of



## SUMMARY

An owl and a cat sailed away together in a pretty, light-green boat. They brought along some honey to eat and a wad of cash, bundled up in a British banknote. The owl strummed a little

the poem. The fact that they're different species never becomes a problem either, nor does the surrounding world pose any challenges. They have "plenty of money," find a Pig who sells them a ring on the cheap, and get married the "next day," with a friendly local Turkey officiating. They do sail "for a year and a day" to find the ring, but there's no indication that this long voyage is difficult—or even necessary! In the poem's imaginary world, all that matters is that they're madly in love.

The poem is thus a fantasy of ideal romance: for these lovers, everything is sweetness and light. The couple feeds exclusively on sweet and tasty treats like "honey" and "quince" (an apple-like fruit) using a "runcible spoon"—an imaginary object that sounds rare, exotic, and delightful. They get married in "the land where the Bong-Tree grows," an imaginary place that sounds like a kind of paradise, and then dance beneath the "moon": the age-old symbol of romance. In general, unlike the couples in most love stories (and Lear poems, for that matter!), the Owl and Pussy-cat are happy from start to finish. The poem portrays romantic bliss between a fantastical couple, imagining a love more perfect and pure than any that could exist in reality. The poem seems to suggest that this is what true love feels like, or at least should feel like.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat,  
They took some honey, and plenty of money,  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.*

Lines 1-4 establish the poem's main characters and initial [setting](#). The poem's heroes are the pair mentioned in the title—"The Owl and the Pussy-Cat"—and they take a delightful trip to "sea" together. By the end of the [stanza](#), it's clear that they're a couple, and they're madly in love.

In these opening lines, the atmosphere is already charming and romantic. The couple's boat is "beautiful," their food is sweet ("honey"), and their money is "plent[iful]." In fact, their money is "Wrapped up" in even *more* money! A "five-pound note" (similar to a U.S. five-dollar bill) would have had a lot of purchasing power back in 1871, when the poem was published. Basically, the Owl and the Pussy-Cat have everything they need for a happy, comfortable journey.

Of course, none of these details would make sense in the real world. Cats and owls don't fall for each other, don't sail in boats, don't typically eat honey, and don't spend money! The poem places readers firmly in the world of make-believe and

"nonsense"—the term often used to describe Edward Lear's writing. Taken on its own terms, however, that world is playful and inviting.

Here and throughout, the poem uses a bouncy accentual meter. This means that its pattern is based on the number of stresses per line, but not the number of syllables or the placement of stresses. Note, too, that first eight lines of each [stanza](#) alternate between longer and shorter lines, making them resemble ballad stanzas. Generally, they also alternate between four stresses and three stresses apiece. Listen to lines 1-2, for example:

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat,

(Some readers might argue that there's a stress on "green" there, but it's subtle.) There's also a boatload of [rhyme](#), including [internal rhyme](#) ("honey"/"money"). These features give it a sing-song, nursery-rhyme quality that's ideal for a children's poem. (Lear originally wrote "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" for a friend's three-year-old daughter, and it's remained a classic of children's literature for over 150 years.)

### LINES 5-11

*The Owl looked up to the stars above,  
And sang to a small guitar,  
"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,  
What a beautiful Pussy you are,  
You are,  
You are!  
What a beautiful Pussy you are!"*

Lines 5-11 contain the first piece of [dialogue](#) in the poem. This dialogue is sung, not spoken, as the Owl croons it while gazing at the "stars" and strumming "a small guitar." It's all about how "beautiful" the Pussy-cat is—and clearly, the Owl is smitten! The poem is playing on the conventions of old-fashioned ["courtly love,"](#) in which a suitor might woo his beloved by playing a lute or other string instrument. In the next [stanza](#), it becomes clear that the attraction is mutual: "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" are a couple.

The [repetitions](#) here—"You are, / You are," etc.—make sense as part of the Owl's song, but they're also woven into the structure of the poem. Similar repetitions will occur at the end of the following stanzas (see lines 19-22 and 30-33). As a result, the poem itself sounds like a song. In fact, it's sometimes been [set to music](#).

Not surprisingly, these lines are full of musical devices: they contain not only [rhyme](#) ("above"/"love," "guitar"/"are") but also [alliteration](#) ("stars"/"sang"/"small") and [assonance](#) ("you"/"beautiful"). These effects make the language fun to read, hear, recite, or even sing along with the Owl.

## LINES 12-15

*Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!  
How charmingly sweet you sing!  
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
But what shall we do for a ring?"*

Lines 12-15 contain more [dialogue](#), as the Pussy-cat reacts to the Owl's romantic song. And clearly, the song went over well! By now, it's evident that these two were already in love by the time they set sail. The Owl finds the Pussy-cat "beautiful"; the Pussy-cat finds the Owl "elegant," with a "charmingly sweet" singing voice. The Pussy-cat proposes that they get "married" right away, declaring that they've "tarried" (waited) too long already. The Owl doesn't reply and doesn't need to: the couple is on the same page. If they hesitated to marry in the past, that hesitation is gone. The only question now is "what [to] do" for a wedding "ring."

All the [imagery](#) of these first 15 lines—from the "beautiful" boat to the tasty "honey" to the Owl's "charmingly sweet" voice—adds to the poem's atmosphere of sweetness and romance. For this couple, the future is all smooth sailing. Notice, too, that they address each other almost entirely in exclamations, as if they can't contain the exuberance of their love.

These lines also continue the bouncy pattern of [meter](#) and rhyme from the previous stanza. Again, lines alternate between four stresses and three stresses, as readers can hear in lines 14-15:

O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
But what shall we do for a ring?"

The first four lines again follow an ABCB pattern ("sing" and "ring" rhyme while "fowl" and "tarried" obviously do not). And again, the third line of the stanza again features [internal rhyme](#): "married" and "harried" in line 14 mirrors the internal rhyme between "honey" and "money" in line 3. The poem remains delightfully musical and memorable.

## LINES 16-22

*They sailed away, for a year and a day,  
To the land where the Bong-Tree grows  
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood  
With a ring at the end of his nose,  
His nose,  
His nose,  
With a ring at the end of his nose.*

In lines 16-22, the Owl and the Pussy-cat go in quest of a wedding ring.

In order to find it, they "sail[] away, for a year and a day." (Notice the [internal rhyme](#) here, highlighted by the [caesura](#) after "away.") Though this may sound like a long voyage, the poem

gives no indication that it's unpleasant. On the contrary, our heroes seem well stocked with "honey" and "money" and glad to make the trip. If this is the only obstacle the lovers face, it's a pretty minor one!

Eventually, they reach their destination: "the land where the Bong-Tree grows." This is one of Edward Lear's whimsical, made-up places, just as the "Bong-Tree" is a fictional tree. Perhaps this "land" is meant to represent a kind of paradise where the lovers find happiness. In any case, they soon come to a "wood" where a "Piggy-wig" waits "With a ring at the end of his nose." Quest complete!

While a pig who lives in the woods might sound like a wild boar, the ring in his nose makes him seem more like a farm animal. Farmers sometimes clip rings in the noses of pigs, bulls, and other livestock as a means of controlling them. Maybe this pig is somehow both wild *and* tame (in another example of the poem's fanciful "nonsense"); maybe he's escaped from captivity. Anyway, he's exactly what our heroes are looking for.

The poem's sounds continue to fill the story with lighthearted music. Listen to the tongue-twisting [alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [assonance](#) of "wood a Piggy-wig stood," for example (which also features an internal rhyme between "wood" and "stood").

## LINES 23-26

*"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling  
Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."  
So they took it away, and were married next day  
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.*

Having found the "ring" they desired, the Owl and Pussy-cat bargain for it with the Piggy-wig. Their [dialogue](#) is crisp, musical, and silly, thanks to [assonance](#) (of the short /ih/ sound), [consonance](#) of the /l/ sound, and the [internal rhyme](#) of "willing" and "shilling":

"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling  
Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."

Even in the 1870s, "one shilling" was a cheap price for a wedding ring! But this probably isn't jewelry: it's the kind of nose ring farmers clip on their livestock. In real life, pigs don't enjoy these rings: they're often painful, and they prevent the animal from rooting in the ground (something pigs love to do). So maybe the Piggy-wig sells his ring cheaply because he's glad to get rid of it! (Then again, maybe this is an overly logical reading of an absurd scenario.)

Having obtained their ring, the couple "[takes] it away" to an unspecified location. (Maybe they're still in the "land where the Bong-Tree grows," maybe not.) They get "married next day / By the Turkey who lives on the hill." Who is this new character, and what is this "hill"? Why is a turkey officiating a wedding? Who knows? The silliness piles up as the poem nears its conclusion. It's all *supposed* to be a little nonsensical, but the gist is clear:

our heroes have completed their journey and found happiness.

### LINES 27-33

*They dined on mince, and slices of quince,  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;  
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,  
They danced by the light of the moon,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon.*

After the wedding comes the reception! The newlyweds enjoy a delicious meal and a dance in the moonlight. The language of these lines is full of [assonance](#), [sibilance](#), [internal rhyme](#), and absurdity:

They dined on **mince**, and slices of **quince**,  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;  
And **hand in hand**, on the edge of the **sand**,  
They danced by the **light** of the moon [...]

"Mince" is mincemeat, or chopped meat—something cats and owls might actually enjoy. (Both are carnivores, although owls usually catch their prey raw, of course.) "Quince" is a yellow, apple-like fruit: another sweet treat, like "honey." And a "runcible spoon" is—wait, what *is* a runcible spoon? This turns out to be another one of Edward Lear's made-up phrases. In fact, he liked the nonsense word "runcible" so much that he started using it in other poems, like "[How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear](#)" (in which he claims to wear a "runcible hat"). He also drew a runcible spoon at least once, depicting it as a long, ladle-like object. But what does "runcible" *mean*? It's up to the reader.

Like stanzas 1 and 2, the final stanza ends with playful [repetition](#):

They danced by the light of the moon,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon.

This sing-song cadence suits the action perfectly: after all, the characters are dancing the night away! All in all, it's a happy ending—and one that brings the poem full circle. Our heroes begin by sailing off "to sea" and wind up celebrating their marriage "on the edge of the sand."



## SYMBOLS



### THE MOON

The moon is a timeless [symbol](#) of love and romance. While the poem doesn't dig into this symbolism too deeply, it's no coincidence the Owl and the Pussy-Cat dance

beneath the moon, "hand in hand," just after they've gotten married. No portrait of true love would be complete without a little moonlight! (Owls and cats are also nocturnal creatures, so it makes sense that their romance plays out under "the moon" and "the stars above.")

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-33:** " They danced by the light of the moon, / The moon, / The moon, / They danced by the light of the moon."



## POETIC DEVICES

### REPETITION

The poem contains two main kinds of [repetition](#).

First, it repeats a number of words that are central to its story and themes, including "beautiful," "lovely"/"love," "married," and "ring," plus the names of the main characters and the exclamatory "O." Clearly, this is a love story, and one with a happy ending! Then there's the repetitive phrase "hand in hand," which also relates to love—and is especially charming because neither owls nor cats have hands. (Paw in wing?)

Second, there's the structural repetition at the end of each [stanza](#). Lines 7-11, 19-22, and 30-33 all repeat a phrase, partly or in full, four times over. Look at the end of the last stanza, for example:

They danced by the light of the moon,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon.

These repetitions enhance the sing-song quality of the poem, making it more fun for kids to hear and recite. (Or even sing!) Here and in the first stanza, the song-like cadence is especially appropriate, because in each case, the characters themselves are singing or dancing.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "beautiful"
- **Line 7:** "O lovely," "O," "love"
- **Lines 8-11:** " What a beautiful Pussy you are, / You are, / You are! / What a beautiful Pussy you are!"
- **Line 14:** "O," "married"
- **Line 15:** "ring"
- **Lines 19-22:** " With a ring at the end of his nose, / His nose, / His nose, / With a ring at the end of his nose."
- **Line 24:** "ring"

- **Line 25:** “married”
- **Line 29:** “hand,” “hand”
- **Lines 30-33:** “ They danced by the light of the moon, /  
The moon, / The moon, / They danced by the  
light of the moon.”

## IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) contributes to its atmosphere of fun and romance. From the “beautiful pea-green boat” the heroes sail in to the “light of the moon” at their wedding, the sights, sounds, and tastes they experience are unfailingly lovely and enchanting.

Indeed, the imagery isn't solely visual. The Owl sings with a “charmingly sweet” voice—according to the Pussy-cat, anyway—while strumming “a small guitar.” During their voyage, the couple feasts on “honey,” the quintessential sweet food. Later, after their wedding ceremony, they “dine[] on mince, and slices of quince”: chopped meat and sliced, pear-like fruit. The pleasing, unusual rhyme between “mince” and “quince” makes the meal sound delectable. (Both cats and owls are carnivores, so they'd probably welcome mincemeat in real life! It's less common for either animal to eat fruit, but “quince” is another food that matches the sweetness of their love.)

Meanwhile, the visual imagery conjures up simple, wild, nighttime scenes, full of “stars” and “moon[light]” and “sea” and “sand.” A couple of the poem's images are purely invented, forcing the reader to *imagine* what they might be. For example, what's a “Bong-Tree,” and how is a “runcible spoon” different from a regular one? It's up to the reader to come up with visuals that match these whimsical words.

### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea / In a beautiful pea-green boat,”
- **Line 3:** “They took some honey”
- **Lines 5-6:** “The Owl looked up to the stars above, / And sang to a small guitar,”
- **Line 13:** “How charmingly sweet you sing!”
- **Lines 17-22:** “ To the land where the Bong-Tree grows / And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood / With a ring at the end of his nose, / His nose, / His nose, / With a ring at the end of his nose.”
- **Lines 27-33:** “They dined on mince, and slices of quince, / Which they ate with a runcible spoon; / And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand, / They danced by the light of the moon, / The moon, / The moon, / They danced by the light of the moon.”

## ASSONANCE

“The Owl and the Pussy-Cat” is chock full of [assonance](#) and

[internal rhyme](#). These devices work hand in hand with end rhyme to make the poem lively, musical, and enjoyable.

The internal rhymes are actually built into the poem's structure. They feature in most of the four-beat lines, including lines 12, 14, 16, and 18:

Pussy said to the Owl, “You elegant fowl!  
How charmingly sweet you sing!  
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
But what shall we do for a ring?”  
They sailed away, for a year and a day,  
To the land where the Bong-Tree grows  
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood [...]

These patterned rhymes are supplemented by assonance, such as the /eh/ vowel in “said” and “elegant” (line 12), the /o/ vowel in “How” (line 13; the same as in “Owl” and “fowl”), and the /i/ vowel in “ring” (line 19; the same as the /i/ in “Piggy-wig”). The assonance gets especially intense in the final stanza: notice the cascade of short /i/s in “Pig”/“willing”/“shilling”/“ring”/“Pig”/“will,” the long /i/s in “dined” and “slices,” and so on.

All of these effects make the poem intricately musical—as pleasurable and sweet as the love story it tells.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “some honey,” “money”
- **Line 5:** “stars”
- **Line 6:** “guitar”
- **Line 8:** “beautiful,” “you”
- **Line 9:** “You”
- **Line 10:** “You”
- **Line 11:** “beautiful”
- **Line 12:** “said,” “Owl,” “elegant,” “fowl”
- **Line 13:** “How”
- **Line 14:** “married,” “tarried”
- **Line 16:** “away,” “day”
- **Line 18:** “wood,” “Piggy-wig,” “stood”
- **Line 19:** “ring”
- **Line 23:** “Pig,” “willing,” “shilling”
- **Line 24:** “ring,” “Piggy,” “will”
- **Line 25:** “away,” “day”
- **Line 26:** “lives,” “hill”
- **Line 27:** “dined,” “mince,” “slices,” “quince”
- **Line 29:** “hand,” “hand,” “sand”
- **Line 30:** “danced,” “by,” “light”
- **Line 33:** “by,” “light”

## CAESURA

Most of the poem's [caesuras](#) highlight its [internal rhymes](#).

Typically, the caesura will fall after the first rhyme word in a pair, as in line 3:



They took some **honey**, and plenty of money,

Similar examples occur in lines 12, 14, 16, 25, 27, and 29. Here's how these last three look in context:

So they took it **away**, and were married next day  
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.  
They dined on **mince**, and slices of quince,  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;  
And hand in **hand**, on the edge of the sand,

Each pause highlights a rhyme word ("away"/"day," "mince"/"quince," "hand"/"sand"), making it easier for young children to notice the pattern and understand how the music of the poem works.

The caesuras play other roles, too. For example, the pauses in lines 7 ("O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love") and 14 ("O let us be married! too long we have tarried") are marked with exclamation points. These sudden expressions of exuberance, which momentarily halt the poem's rhythm, underscore the poem's joyous mood.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "honey, and"
- **Line 7:** "Pussy! O"
- **Line 12:** "Owl, "You"
- **Line 14:** "married! too"
- **Line 16:** "away, for"
- **Line 23:** "Pig, are"
- **Line 24:** "ring?" Said, "Piggy, "I"
- **Line 25:** "away, and"
- **Line 27:** "mince, and"
- **Line 29:** "hand, on"

## DIALOGUE

"The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" is a narrative poem that incorporates snippets of [dialogue](#). Mainly, this consists of the central couple's loving words to each other. The Owl's part is sung, while the Pussy-cat's part is spoken:

"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,  
What a beautiful Pussy you are,  
You are,  
You are!  
What a beautiful Pussy you are!"  
Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!  
How charmingly sweet you sing!  
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
But what shall we do for a ring?"

The exclamatory "O"s, plus the exclamation points, in both halves of the dialogue convey the exuberance of the couple's

love. They adore each other from the start, and the only question on either side is how to get hold of a wedding ring. Later, there's also a brief dialogue with the Piggy-wig:

"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling  
Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."

The couple seems to ask the question with one voice—again, they're completely in sync with each other. Their [tone](#) is affectionate ("Dear Pig"), as if their mutual love carries over into their interactions with others. The Piggy-wig's answer is brief and obliging, and echoes the words that traditionally seal a wedding vow ("I do"). The transaction the speakers are conducting seems like a formality, as the Pig is all too happy to sell his ring cheaply.

In just a few lines, then, the poem's dialogue conjures up a "charmingly sweet" mood, if not a whole joyous fantasy world.

#### Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-11:** "'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love, / What a beautiful Pussy you are, / You are, / You are! / What a beautiful Pussy you are!'"
- **Lines 12-15:** "Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl! / How charmingly sweet you sing! / O let us be married! too long we have tarried: / But what shall we do for a ring?""
- **Lines 23-24:** "'Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling / Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will.""



## VOCABULARY

**Five-pound note** (Line 4) - A British banknote worth five pounds sterling. (In 1871, when the poem was published, five pounds would have been nearly \$550 in 2022 U.S. dollars.)

**Fowl** (Line 12) - Bird.

**Tarried** (Line 14) - Waited; delayed.

**Bong-Tree** (Line 17) - One of Edward Lear's invented "nonsense" words. What sort of tree is a Bong-Tree? You decide!

**Ring at the end of his nose** (Line 19, Line 22) - Humans sometimes affix rings to the noses of pigs, cows, and other farm animals as a way of controlling them. Nose rings prevent pigs from rooting (digging in the ground with their snouts).

**Shilling** (Line 23) - A now-defunct coin in the UK, worth twelve pence (or 1/20 of a pound). A single shilling in 1871 would have equaled a little over \$5 in 2022 U.S. dollars.

**Mince** (Line 27) - Mincemeat (a dish of chopped meat).

**Quince** (Line 27) - A hard yellow fruit resembling an apple or pear.

**Runcible spoon** (Line 28) - A fictional utensil. "Runcible" is one of Lear's nonsense words, and he applied it to other nouns in his poems as well (e.g., "runcible hat" in "[How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear](#).") In [drawings](#), Lear depicted the runcible spoon as a long, ladle-like object.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" contains three stanzas of 11 lines each. The last three lines of each stanza repeat the eighth line partly or in full—for example:

They danced by the light of the moon,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon.

This effect gives the poem a sing-song, nursery rhyme-like cadence, fun for kids to hear and recite.

Like many nursery rhymes and children's poems, this one uses accentual meter. For the first eight lines of each stanza, it alternates between four-beat and three-beat lines. Then come the one-beat [repetitions](#) in the ninth and tenth lines ("You are," "His nose," "The moon"), followed by the three-beat eleventh line (a repetition of the eighth). Accentual meter tends to sound bouncy and lively rather than restrained and strict, so it's a good choice for children's verse.

The poem is also full of [end rhyme](#) and [internal rhyme](#): ear candy for kids! Similar-sounding and repeated words make the language delightful to hear and easy to memorize. For more about how rhyme works in this poem, see the Rhyme section of this guide.

### METER

The poem uses [accentual meter](#), meaning that its pattern is based on the number of stresses per line, but not the number of syllables or the placement of stresses. The first eight lines of each [stanza](#) alternate between four stresses and three stresses apiece. Listen to how this pattern sounds in lines 1-4, for example:

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat,  
They took some honey, and plenty of money,  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

The ninth and tenth lines of each stanza then contain one stress apiece (e.g., "You are"), and the eleventh line repeats the eighth, so it contains three stresses.

Accentual meter is often found in nursery rhymes and

children's verse (the genre to which "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" belongs). It's strongly rhythmic and easy for the ear to follow, yet its flexibility makes it sound jaunty and playful rather than strict. This combination appeals to kids—and adults, too!

### RHYME SCHEME

The poem's first [stanza](#) follows a [rhyme scheme](#) of ABCBDEDEEEEE. The second and third stanzas follow a nearly identical pattern, except that the fifth and seventh lines don't rhyme. The final rhyme word of each stanza gets repeated four times (e.g., "nose" in lines 19-22). Also, most of the poem's four-beat lines [rhyme internally](#)—for example, "They sailed away, for a year and a day" (line 16).

In other words, this is a very rhyme-rich poem, which follows a consistent pattern with a few small variations. These qualities make the poem easy for readers of all ages to follow and memorize, not to mention fun to read and hear. They give the poem a nursery-rhyme flavor, especially in combination with the lively accentual meter, silly characters, etc. It's no accident that "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" is considered a classic of children's verse.



### SPEAKER

"The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" has a third-person speaker—the same signature voice that narrates virtually all of Edward Lear's "nonsense" verse. This speaker often uses silly, made-up terms like "Bong-Tree" and "runcible" (an undefined adjective that also appears in a number of other Lear poems). The speaker tosses out these terms with little to no explanation, creating a kind of private imaginary world. This playful, singsong voice has delighted readers the world over since Lear first began publishing his children's books in the late 19th century.



### SETTING

For a short poem, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" contains a surprising number of [settings](#). It begins at "sea," where the Owl and the Pussy-cat sail out on a nighttime voyage. Later, the couple arrives at the imaginary "land where the Bong-Tree grows," where they find the Piggy-wig in a "wood." They take the Pig's ring "away" to some other location, where they're married by a Turkey "who lives on the hill" (which hill? who knows?). Finally, they wind up on a beach, dancing by moonlight "on the edge of the sand."

Basically, the poem traces a whimsical journey. As a comic poem for children, it contains a lot of lively, silly action with a satisfying ending. The main characters end up more or less where they began: at the edge of the ocean. (The beach they dance on may not be the same one they set out from, but the similar locations bring the poem full circle.) Most of the action

also takes place at night, beneath the "moon" and "stars"—a perfect setting for lovers, and for nocturnal cats and owls.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Edward Lear first published "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" in 1870, in an American magazine called *Our Young Folks*, and subsequently included it in the collection *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets* (1871). This collection also featured such beloved works as "[The Duck and the Kangaroo](#)," a similar example of nonsense [anthropomorphic](#) poetry. Although Lear hoped to make his name as a painter, he became most celebrated for his light verse, including his multitude of [limericks](#). Though Lear himself didn't invent the limerick, he popularized and expanded the form, most famously in *The Book of Nonsense* (1846).

Lear's limericks and children's poetry find inspiration in older English nursery rhymes. His 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 *Nonsense Songs*). In the 20th century, Lear's work influenced Dr. Seuss, Ogden Nash, and other well-known writers of light verse.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like many of Edward Lear's children's poems, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" features a journey: in this case, a voyage across the "sea" to the mythical "land where the Bong-Tree grows." Lear, too, traveled the world, spending time in Jerusalem, Paris, Corsica, and San Remo in the years leading up to the poem's publication. As a visual artist, he painted many of the foreign landscapes he visited, and 19th-century advances in rail and ocean travel facilitated his nomadic lifestyle. His characters' love of travel often reflects their desire for freedom and happiness, and it seems to have been distinctly personal for the author.

Unlike many of Lear's poems, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" depicts an ideal romantic relationship. Most of Lear's characters are lonely eccentrics or heartbroken lovers, like the hero of "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo." Lear himself led a life marked by romantic frustration. Though his sexuality and romantic experience are subjects of scholarly debate, most biographers agree that he was a gay man during an age (the UK's Victorian era) when homosexuality was forbidden and even criminalized. His long-time love for his friend Franklin Lushington was largely (though not entirely) unrequited,

causing tension between the two. While many of Lear's poems seem to channel a private romantic disappointment, "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" instead imagines a perfect love—one where there are no real obstacles and everything works out beautifully. It also pays tribute to his beloved cat, [Foss](#), the inspiration for "the Pussy-cat."



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem, Animated](#) — Watch an animated adaptation of "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpwAP36-w7E>)
- [A Reading of the Poem](#) — Actress Judi Dench reads "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MtIJsxHMzw>)
- [The Poet's Life](#) — A short biography of Edward Lear, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edward-lear>)
- [The Poem, Illustrated](#) — View the poem with Lear's original illustrations. (<https://archive.org/details/e-lear-nonsense-songs-stories-1888/page/12/mode/2up>)
- [The Runcible Spoon](#) — What in the world is a runcible spoon? Find more context here. (<https://www.straightdope.com/21342365/what-s-a-runcible-spoon>)
- [A Lear Documentary](#) — A short BBC film on the life and art of Edward Lear. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ-zbjfn3k>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDWARD LEAR POEMS

- [The Duck and the Kangaroo](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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