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Language Arts

Nonsense for a Reason in *Alice in Wonderland*

Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, best known by his pen name Lewis Carroll, has written many novels, poems, and short stories in his lifetime but his most famous for his children's "nonsense" novels: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the sequel *Through the Looking Glass*. His works, especially the two mentioned, have influenced countless readers over the years, and references to his writings can be found in every type of media from the song "White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane to the the *Matrix* trilogy. While both books are intended for a child's entertainment, they are full of symbolism and hidden critique. His clever wordplay, use of logic and reasoning, and incredible imagination are all trademarks of his style of writing, which is often referred to as "literary nonsense." To readers with little experience with Carroll's work, this term seems to perfectly describe Carroll's confusing and often rambling style, but when more thoroughly inspected, it becomes obvious that this "nonsense" has a far deeper meaning.

The poem "The Walrus and The Carpenter" from *Through the Looking Glass* is a classic tale narrated by Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum about a walrus and a carpenter who, while strolling down the beach one sunny night, convince a large bunch of oysters to take a walk with them: "Their shoes were clean and neat-/ And this was odd, because, you know,/ They hadn't any feet." (Lewis Carroll, 74-75). After much talk of whimsical nonsense, the walrus and the carpenter eat the unsuspecting oysters.

There are many speculations on what the symbolism behind this poem actually is, but one theory, addressed in the movie *Dogma*, suggests that it is about religions tricking their followers. According to this theory, the walrus represents Eastern religions as either Buddha or Ganesha, while the carpenter represents Jesus and all Western religions. The two of them trick the helpless oysters, representing the innocent masses, with their words and then use them for their own gain, which in this case is as food (MacArthur). Many argue that this is not the true meaning behind the poem since Carroll was also an Anglican clergyman, but it is also noted that he was pushed towards his clergy position by his father and eventually grew to dislike the whole of the Anglican Church (The Explicator). The true meaning of the poem may never be known since Carroll never told anyone, and it was one of many things left unexplained in his diaries.

“Jabberwocky” is yet another famous poem from *Through the Looking Glass*, containing many of the characteristics that earned Carroll's works the title “literary nonsense” (Fiona MacArthur). This poem is first read by Alice when she holds the book containing it up to her mirror, and the first stanza is later told by her to Humpty Dumpty when he claims to be able to explain any poem ever invented and a good many that haven't been invented yet. “Jabberwocky” is about a boy who is warned by his father to beware the Jabberwock, a great beast with jaws that bite and claws that catch, and so takes his vorpal sword and seeks the beast. When they meet, the boy slays the monster and takes its head back to his father to receive his praise. Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice that many of the words in the poem are portmanteaus, or words with two meanings packed into them (The Explicator). For instance, “slithy” means both “lithe” and “slimy,” while “mimsy” is “flimsy” and “miserable” at the same time (The Explicator). He also clears up the rest of the nonsense words in this poem such as “outgrubing,” which he says is something between bellowing and whistling with a sneeze in the middle.

The first stanza goes: “Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe / All mimsy were the borogoves / And the mome raths outgrabe” (Lewis Carroll page 126). As Humpty explains it to Alice, this

loosely translates to, It was four in the afternoon and the slithy toves, a mix between a badger, a lizard, and a corkscrew, went round and round the grass-plot of a sundial until they had worn holes in the ground (The Explicator, UMass Dartmouth). The borogoves, thin, shabby birds with their feathers sticking out, were mimsy and the mome raths, sorts of green pigs that lost their way, outgribed (MacArthur website). This style of making up words to describe altogether new concepts or creatures as he pictured them has been compared to that of Dr. Seuss: it provides entertainment to children who laugh at these nonsense words, while at the same time has its own meaning when explained.

Lewis Carroll had a writing style unlike any seen before his time. His “literary nonsense” has provided entertainment for countless children, while amusing and stimulating the minds of adults at the same time. While many of the characters and events in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are known or debated symbols or references to something else, their true meanings could only ever be understood by Carroll himself.

Works Cited

Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking Glass*. New York, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1992.

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