

"**Jabberwocky**" is a [nonsense poem](#) written by [Lewis Carroll](#) and included in his 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The book tells of [Alice's](#) adventures within the [back-to-front world](#) of a [looking glass](#).

In an early scene in which she first encounters the chess piece characters [White King](#) and [White Queen](#), Alice finds a book written in a seemingly unintelligible language. Realising that she is travelling through an inverted world, she recognises that the verses on the pages are written in [mirror-writing](#). She holds a mirror to one of the poems, and reads the reflected verse of "Jabberwocky". She finds the nonsense verse as puzzling as the odd land she has passed into, later revealed as a dreamscape.<sup>[1]</sup>

"Jabberwocky" is considered one of the greatest nonsense poems written in English.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Its playful, whimsical language has given English [nonsense words](#) and [neologisms](#) such as "[galumphing](#)" and "[chortle](#)".

The poem itself was originally just the first stanza, and was published in a magazine that Carroll put together for family and friends. He entitled that first stanza "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Here Carroll was decidedly tongue-in-cheek, given that he was not Anglo-Saxon. ("Anglo-Saxon refers to people who lived in England in approximately 600 A.D.).

Carroll *was* English, however, and so we tend to think that "Jabberwocky" was influenced both by that Anglo-Saxon verse which he parodies (killing things with swords, heroes on quests, etc.), as well as a few local English legends (the north-English myth of the Lambton Worm is plausible here – it's about a hero that goes and vanquishes a livestock-eating slithery thing).

"Jabberwocky" is part of a larger children's story gone sort-of awry. The nonsense and the rhyming and the fantasy characters all pin this poem down as something your mom or dad might have read you when you were five, but it's much more than that.

Critics have been raving about Carroll for decades. They just love the way that he manages to make his fantastical stories work on *both* a child's and an adult's level. His stories and poems are funny and whimsical, but they're also complicated, dark, and bitter. Children are entertained by the whimsy and fantasy. As adults, we see these layers of complexity emerge the more we read the work. "Jabberwocky" and the *Alice* stories were wildly popular in their time, and they're wildly popular now – for good reason.

Carroll's real name, by the way, was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, and in addition to being one of the greatest and most popular storytellers of his time, he was also an accomplished mathematician, logician, deacon, and photographer

#### SUMMARY

The poem begins with a description of the setting – an afternoon, with strange, nonsense-creatures ("borogoves" [3], "raths" [4]) milling around and making noises. Then, we have some dialogue. A father tells his son to beware of something called a "Jabberwocky" that lurks in the woods and has horrible claws and teeth. There's also some other nasty stuff out there – the "Jubjub bird" (7) and the "Bandersnatch" (8). The son takes his sword and goes out looking for these creatures, and finally finds and kills the Jabberwocky. Upon returning with the creature's head, the father is overjoyed and they celebrate. The first stanza repeats, and things appear to return back to normal.

STANZA 1: This scene seems picturesque, even. Well, except for the fact that we can't quite picture anything here. And that's hard, but it's also part of the magic of the piece. These things can be, to a certain degree, whatever you want them to be, which is why it's so important to play with the language and have fun with it.

- STANZA 2: Now we're in a different place altogether, a place with humans talking.
- This transition would be refreshing if it weren't for the fact that the first word of human speech is *beware*. That's warning that something bad might happen.
- Also, we can tell from the "my son" bit that this is a parent talking. What are we supposed to beware? The Jabberwock, of course, the title...*thing*...of the poem. We have no idea what a Jabberwock is at this point, but if we're to beware of it, we can be pretty sure that it's not a fluffy bunny.
- And we're right – in the next line, the parent warns the son of biting jaws and grabbing claws.
- So this thing is pointy, no doubt about it. Maybe a dragon-like creature? Or a horrible wolf-like thing? The parent obviously knows what it is, but we don't.

Lines 7-8

*Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun The frumious Bandersnatch!"*

- Oh no, *more* awful things.
- Like we said before, deciding what these creatures are, what they look like and how they behave is part of the fun.
- The Jubjub bird could be anything. Anything you're most scared of. Hawks? Giant, angry ostrich? Spooky owl? All are possible.
- Same with the Bandersnatch. Sounds a little like *badger*, but if we go with Humpty Dumpty, *toves* are also a little like badgers. Maybe these are bigger and fiercer than the average badger.
- And *frumious* sounds like a combination of *fuming* (i.e., "smoking" or "angry") and *furious*. Clearly, these are creatures not to be trifled with, which is probably why the parent is taking great pains to warn the child.

### STANZA 3: Lines 9-10

*He took his vorpal sword in hand; Long time the manxome foe he sought—*

- Now we see why there was a warning in the first place.  
Apparently, the son is going *hunting* for these creatures. Maybe they are disturbing the otherwise peaceful wood.
- And what's a *vorpal sword*? Luckily we have the word *sword* to tell us that it's a weapon; *vorpal* is just a modifier here. But what a modifier! It's reminiscent of *vortex*, *warp*, and *portal*. This thing sounds almost like a light-saber. It's no ordinary sword, that's for sure.
- So our hunter, the hero of the story, goes out into the wild for a long time, to seek (the past tense is *sought*) the horrible creatures his parent has described to him.
- One last fiddly word: *manxome*. Sounds a little bit like a combination between *noisome* (i.e., "foul") and *mangy*. That would be about right, it would seem, for evil creatures that one wants to vanquish with a sword.
- So in short: our hero takes his weapon, heads off, and spends a good long time trying to find these evil creatures.

### Lines 11-12

*So rested he by the Tumtum tree, And stood awhile in thought.*

- Thankfully, these lines are starting to get a little bit easier to comprehend.
- We might not know what a Tumtum tree is, but the rest of these lines are very clear.
- Our hero has been seeking his foes for a while, and is now taking a break.
- So he rests by the tree, and loses himself thinking for a little while.

He might be thinking about how best to find these scary beasts. Or how he might best conquer them. Or maybe just about how tired he is.

## STANZA 4: Lines 13-14

*And, as in uffish thought he stood, The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,*

- Here we have another clear plot point, and it happens to be the beginning of the climax of the poem: the Jabberwock itself appears.
- The hero has been standing in *uffish* thought – what could that mean? *Uffish* sounds a little like *huffy*, which could mean "impatient." That's possible. Or, given the context we have up until this point, it could just be a strange word for dreamy. After all, our hero has been searching for a long time, carrying a big sword. He's probably at least a little weary, and when you're weary, thoughts can go a-wandering.
- The Jabberwock gets a nice, scary detail here. We're told that he has "eyes of flame." This makes him seem like a dragon (at least, inasmuch as we tend to associate mythical creatures and flames with dragons).
- The flame detail also cements the Jabberwock's place in the story as villain. If you think about it, the biggest good vs. evil story we have is that between Heaven and Hell. And what's Hell made of? Fire.

## Lines 15-16

*Came whiffling through the tulgey wood, And burbled as it came!*

- Here comes the monster – and our mystery verb is *whiffling*.  
What could it mean? It sounds a bit like *whistling*, but the last time we checked, dragon-ish creatures didn't whistle while they attacked you. But! *Whistling* can also mean "to move very fast," which is much more likely.
- We also have a mystery adjective, *tulgey*, which describes the woods that our hero and villain are about to duel in. Might be derived from *bulge*? As in, something grotesque, enlarged? This is possible and would give the woods a dark, big feeling to them that would make the encounter even more sinister.

- The Jabberwock also *burbles* as it approaches. We understand *burble*, in today's vernacular, to mean the kind of noise that a baby would make – soft, nonsense sounds. This is obviously not the case here.
- So what could it mean? Maybe it's more akin to *growling*. In any case, it doesn't seem like the beast would suddenly be making baby noises. We can safely assume that *burbled*, in this case, is a more threatening word than we're used to.

STANZA 5:

## Lines 17-18

*One, two! One, two! And through and through The vorpal blade  
went snicker-snack!*

- These are straight action lines here. And it's exciting, hence all the exclamation points. This is high adventure, told in an excited manner.
- The "One, two! One two!" bit seems to mimic a swinging motion, almost like a one-two punch but with a sword. We can picture the hero, here, swinging his sword quickly back and forth.
- The "through and through" part tells us that the blade is in fact making contact with the Jabberwocky. We can almost see the blade passing *through* the creature again and again. (Try not to imagine the gore *too* vividly.)
- These lines end with a bit of *onomatopoeia*. Look in the "Sound Check" for more of an explanation, but basically it's a word that sounds like its definition. So in this case, "snicker-snack!" seems to imitate the whistle of the blade through the air ("snicker") and then the blade connecting with its target ("snack!" which sounds a bit like "whack!").

- These hearty motion words and onomatopoeia give these lines a very action-movie feel to them. The plot is rushing past us, and all we see is a blur of motion, and a flickering blade. All we hear is the sound of metal meeting flesh.

## Lines 19-20

*He left it dead, and with its head He went galumphing back.*

- The fight ends quickly and decisively, it seems.
- The Jabberwocky is both dead *and* beheaded.
- Why take the head? Well, this is a tradition that extends from ancient to modern times. (Certainly we've all seen trophy deer/moose/bear heads on hunting cabin walls, and this is probably no different.) It's proof that the animal has been conquered, and a memento for a job well done (at least according to the hunter).

Our hero takes the head and goes *galumphing* back. This word has made it into the English dictionary, and means "to move heavily." This makes a lot of sense; if you were carrying a giant dragon-ish head all the way back to your house, after a big fight, you'd probably move pretty heavily too.

## STANZA6: Lines 21-22

*"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy!"*

- The setting has changed again.
- Now the son is back at home, and the parental figure is speaking again.
- The parent asks what is probably a rhetorical question: *did you kill the thing?* Even though the hero comes back with the Jabberwock's head, and it seems quite obvious that the Jabberwock is dead.
- The word *hast* is an old form of *have*; *thou* is an older form of *you*; and *slain* is simply past tense of *slay*, which means "to kill."

- The parent then asks the son to give him a hug ("come to my arms"), and describes the son as *beamish*. This word isn't so hard: to *beam* means "to smile," specifically to smile emphatically. Which is probably what we'd be doing too, if we had just emerged victorious from a battle with evil.

## Lines 23-24

*O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!" He chortled in his joy.*

- This is the first true evidence that we get that the parent is a *father*, because it's a "he" who is doing the chortling (which means "laughing") in the second line.
- *Frabjous* sounds a whole lot like *fabulous*, doesn't it? Maybe a combination of *fabulous* and *joyous*, just to get that "j" sound in there. And also because we know by this point that Carroll does love combining words.
- So what's up with the "callooh! callay!" part there? Well, it's probably something like the Wonderland-equivalent of "hooray!" and "yay!" – sounds similar, no? And, as with other things in this poem, sound is mostly what we have to go on.

We can also safely assume that this is a moment of joy (it says so right there), so those associations make sense.

## STANZA 7: Lines 25-28

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.*

- We've seen this before: it's the exact same difficult, whimsical stanza as the first. What's the poem doing, putting this stanza in here twice?
- We aren't going to explain the vocab here, so feel free to check out the first stanza if you need a quick refresher.
- Here we're interested in what's happened in between these "book-end" stanzas.

- Well, at first it would seem that everything after this incident returns back to normal. The stanza repeating itself would indicate that all the creatures who were presumably disturbed by the Jabberwock go back to doing whatever it was they were doing before.
- This sounds peaceful, but what about the Jubjub bird and the Bandersnatch?
- Oh yes, this is not a done deal. Though the repetition of the first stanza would seem to indicate that all things in Wonderland have gone back to the way they were before the Jabberwock came into the picture, the hero has not vanquished all foes.
- Thus, the possibility for further evil, and further battle, remains in the ending pastoral scene.
- This slight opening of the ending makes the poem more interesting, we think, because of the way that it mimics life.
- It's almost as if the message is: good can triumph, but it's never an absolute. Appearances can be deceiving. Don't let your guard down. *Especially* not in Wonderland.

## THEMES

### 1. Violence

The climax of "Jabberwocky" is violent indeed – a hallmark of the "epic ballad" form, of which this poem is a tiny sample. The warnings in the second stanza of the poem set up the danger, which is quickly followed up by the protagonist heading directly off to rid the forest of the wild and unseemly creatures that are described. Not only does the hero vanquish the most fearsome of his foes, but he also *beheads* him, dragging the bloody thing back in order to prove his might to his father. The violence here plays to our desire for good to stomp evil right into the ground.

## 2. Perseverance

In keeping with the "epic" scope of the poem, our protagonist's journey is no walk in the park. In order to triumph, he must first persevere. This theme is related to the theme of "Men and Masculinity" – it almost seems as if the protagonist has something to prove, as he hears his father's warnings and promptly goes out to find and vanquish the badness that lurks beyond. He seeks and seeks, and though we don't have a sense of the temporal element of his journey (after all, we only get 28 lines), our hero's determination pays off. He's rewarded, as one might expect, with a joyous homecoming.

## 3. Men and Masculinity

Carroll first published a bit of "Jabberwocky" as a kind of satire of Anglo-Saxon verse, which might well be the "manliest" poetry there is (in addition to being the earliest in English). Think *Beowulf*: a man goes out to fight a monster. While it's more complicated than that, *Beowulf* set the tone for centuries to come, and Carroll knew it. "Jabberwocky" is all about conquest, which has traditionally been considered the domain of the masculine. The fact that the protagonist, after hearing the dire warnings given him by his father, picks up his sword and heads out into the woods *anyway*, is one of those brave-but-maybe-unreasonable things that heroes tend to do in adventure tales. "Jabberwocky" is no exception.

## 4. Good vs. Evil

In "Jabberwocky," "Good vs. Evil" is linked with the theme of "Violence." When good (our hero) and evil (the Jabberwock) meet in this story, violence ensues. "Jabberwocky" pits the individual (one lone man) against a mythical beast. Since this beast doesn't exist in our world, it becomes something bigger, a kind of metaphor for Evil with a capital E. If it were simply human vs. human – say, white knight vs. black knight – you

could draw the same conclusions, but perhaps the outcome would be less surprising. One small man triumphing over a big huge beast is an order of magnitude unto itself.

#### 5. Man and the Natural World

"Man and the Natural World" might be the most interesting theme in the whole poem, because it's the one theme in which we can bring in the goofy language. How, you ask? Well, the "natural world" that Carroll creates certainly doesn't seem to have anything to do with the "natural world" that we inhabit, yet there are many similarities between the world of the Jubjub bird and the world of the ordinary owl. Carroll's positioning of hero vs. beast is essentially the age-old story of Man vs. Nature. While the theme "Good vs. Evil" also figures into "Jabberwocky," the Evil in this case is basically *Stuff We Are Afraid Of In the Woods*. Even the first peaceful stanza is full of unknowable, strange creatures doing unknowable, strange things. And they get significantly less peaceful when they return in the second stanza, because not all the evil has been banished.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "Jabberwocky Quotes." *Shmoop*. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 18 Oct. 2015.