Jabberwocky Study Guide

Jabberwocky by Lewis Carroll

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Introduction

"Jabberwocky" is probably Carroll's most well-known poem. It is the first of many nonsense poems set into the text of the beloved English novel *Through the Looking-Glass*, published in 1872, six years after the more commonly known *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Because the poem employs conventional structures of grammar and many familiar words, however, it is not "pure nonsense." In fact, while both books were composed for the ten-year-old Alice Liddell, it is generally accepted that Carroll's studies in logic firmly ground the thought beneath the imaginative works, so that adults find as much to appreciate in the novels and poetry as children. The importance of "Jabberwocky" as a central focus of meaning for the novel is indicated by Carroll's intention that the drawing of the Jabberwock should appear as the title-page illustration for *Through the Looking-Glass*.

In the novel, Alice goes through a mirror into a room and world where things are peculiarly backward. She finds a book in a language she doesn't know, and when she holds the book up to a mirror, or looking-glass, she is able to read "Jabberwocky," a mock-heroic ballad in which the identical first and last four lines enclose five stanzas charting the progress of the hero: warning, setting off, meditation and preparation, conquest, and triumphant return. The four lines that open and close the poem were published originally in 1855 as *Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. It is this stanza that Humpty Dumpty, whom Alice meets shortly after reading the poem, takes pains to explicate. While the meaning of the poem is obscured by its nonsense elements, and general interpretations widely vary, Humpty Dumpty's explication is certainly much less helpful in discovering meaning in "Jabberwocky" than Alice's initial response:

"Somehow it fills my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something:* that's clear, at any rate—"

Author Biography

Lewis Carroll was born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson on January 27, 1832, in Daresbury, Cheshire; he was the eldest son of a clergyman in the Church of England. At a young age, Dodgson began writing humorous poetry and demonstrated an aptitude for mathematics. After completing his education at home and at schools in Richmond and Rugby, he began studies at Oxford at the age of 18. Two and a half years later Dodgson was made a fellow of Christ Church, Oxford, and assumed a position as lecturer in mathematics. In 1856 he began writing humorous pieces for journals under the pen name Lewis Carroll, which was based on Latin translations of his first and second names. 1856 was also the year Dodgson met Alice Liddell, the daughter of the dean of Christ Church, who later served as the model for the protagonist of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the other "Alice" books. Four years later Dodgson's first mathematical treatise was published. He remained at Oxford for the rest of his life, lecturing until 1881 and writing a variety of scholarly works on mathematics and logic as well as his poetry, fiction, and essays. He died in Guildford, Surrey, England on January 14, 1898.

Poem Text

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe."Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back."And, hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

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Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

Carroll explicitly defined certain words when the first stanza of this poem was published as a poem in its own right as "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." He provided a glossary, or list of meanings, for some of the unfamiliar words; this list was later incorporated into Humpty Dumpty's explication in *Alice in Wonderland.* The first line begins with the now archaic English contraction for "It was" and contains the noun "brillig" which Carroll says comes from the broiling or grilling done in the early evening (br + ill + i[n]g) in preparation for dinner. "Toves" are supposedly badger-like creatures, and the adjective "slithy" is a portmanteau made up of "lithe" and "slimy." The definition offered for "gyre" in the second line is "to scratch"; "gimble" is defined as "to bore holes." Carroll has directed us to pronounce these both with a hard "g." However, in American English "gyre" is pronounced with the soft sound of the "j" in "june." Furthermore, "gyre" as a noun in its own right means "to circle," so it makes sense that its use as a verb might have that same meaning. "Gimble" is said to be associated with the noun "gimlet," "a small tool for boring holes." "Wabe" is defined by Carroll as "the side of a hill," but the explanation proposed by Alice as a portmanteau of "way + before/ behind" seems much more helpful. Thus, the line can be read, quite poetically, as "Did spin and spike in the way beyond." The second line ends with a semi-colon in some versions of the poem, but with a colon in the last version edited by Carroll. A semi-colon would indicate a lesser break than a period, establishing two independent thoughts connected into one sentence. A colon suggests a further amplification of, or elaboration on, what has already been said, and in fact in this case the colon might stand for a break plus the word "however": "It was evening and the toves were having a great time [; however,] the borogoves weren't very happy and the raths felt so bad they cried." "Mimsy" in line 3 is made up of "flimsy" and "miserable," and the "borogoves" which it describes are said to be parrots. The "raths" of line 4 are defined as turtles, and Carroll offers an interesting etymology, or word history, for the adjective "mome" as being related to "solemn," which he suggests comes from an earlier (imaginary) word "solemome." The verb that ends the stanza is said to derive from a word meaning "to shriek," although Humpty Dumpty is more explicit, indicating that it is something "between bellowing and whistling," which suggests a sobbing, crying kind of sound, and which coupled with the sound of "outgrabe," perhaps might come close to being a past tense form for "outgrieve," or "grieve out[loud]." Carroll's original intention of the alliteration of the hard "g" for "gyre" and "gimble" in line 2 is lost with the American pronunciation of the soft "j" beginning "gyre." However, the assonance between the vowel sounds in "slithy" and "gyre" in lines 1 and 2 remains to emphasize the musicality of the poem, as does the assonance of the short "i" in "brillig," "gimble," and "mimsy" in lines 1, 2, and 3, respectively, and the long "o" sounds in "borogoves" and "mome" in lines 3 and 4. The stanza containing lines 1-4 establishes the setting for the story about to be told. Carroll has offered a literal English translation of the passage:

It was evening, and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hill-side: all unhappy were the parrots; and the grave turtles squeaked out. There were probably sun-dials on the top of the hill, and the "borogoves" were afraid that their nests would be undermined. The hill was probably full of the nests of "raths," which ran out, squeaking with fear, on hearing the "toves" scratching outside. This is an obscure, but deeply-affecting, relic of ancient Poetry.

The first two lines set a scene of lighthearted happiness in which all seems well, but the last two hint at impending doom.

Lines 5-8:

The first proper noun in this stanza is related to the title of the poem itself, and so bears some serious consideration in both its form as the thing, the "Jabberwock," and the activity of the thing, "Jabberwocky." The first part of either word is "jabber," and a synonym for this is "babble," a word that brings up immediately an association with the biblical tower erected in the city of Babel. "Babble" thus refers to the sounds that resulted from God's confusion of the supposed one original human language into many so that people could no longer understand each other and cooperate to build the tower to heaven. "-Wock" or "-wocky" may refer to an old Scottish word for "voice." Hence, the "Jabberwock" could be called a "Babble-Voice," and "Jabberwocky" might be "Babblement." The central idea is that a father is warning his son against a creature whose sounds are without meaning.

The father's warning becomes explicit in the sixth line about the dangers inherent in the Jabberwock's jaws and claws. In the seventh line he extends the warning to include a second important creature: the Jubjub bird. Since sound is such a significant feature of this poem, it seems justified to take the sound of "jubjub" as being close to the word "jujube," a candy named for a fruit tree, and to assume an association with the sticky sweetness of the fruit the bird eats. Furthermore, in Carroll's later book-length poem *The Hunting of the Snark* it is made clear that the Jubjub bird sings songs that are attractive to the Jabberwock, so that one would likely find the Jabberwock in close proximity to the Jubjub bird.

"Frumious" in the eighth line is a portmanteau explained at length in Carroll's preface to *The Hunting of the Snark* (which he says "is to some extent connected with "Jabberwocky"). In short, to simply have two words packed together as, for example, "fuming-furious," does not have the poetic effect of "frumious," for it stresses the one over the other. Thus, "if you have □ a perfectly balanced mind, you will say 'frumious.'" This gives the full effect of both meanings in a familiar-sounding adjective structure that is much more efficient than a hyphenated word.

Also in the eighth line, the third proper noun, "Bandersnatch," has two parts, which appear readily comprehensible: "Bander-" and "-snatch." The "snatch" would of course refer to something which "snatches" or takes, as a "snitch" is one who "snitches." "Bander" might feasibly be a combination of "band" and "banter," a kind of portmanteau.

There is a specialized meaning of the word "band" which is in keeping with Carroll's pursuits in logic, wherein "band" refers to the link between the subject and predicate of a sentence that helps them make sense together. "Banter" is a light verbal exchange between people. Thus it might be that the father is warning the son against this creature who pretends to exchange conventional pleasantries (for example, "Have a nice day!") while actually stealing the meaning or sense from the words.

The sound of the poem is enhanced in this stanza by the use of alliteration of the "j" in the words "Jabberwock," "jaws," and "Jubjub," and of the "b" in "Beware," "Jabberwock," "bite," "Jubjub," and "Bandersnatch."

The basic sense of lines 5-8 is clear. The grammatical structure here, as with all the stanzas, is familiar and not nonsensical in itself. In addition, Carroll's use of nonsense words follows what we know and expect of nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and in fact most of the nonsense words are adjectives and nouns.

A plausible "translation," or interpretation, of the stanza might be: "Be careful of the Babble-Voice, my son, because it will either bite you or scratch and tear you. And take care around the bird that eats those sticky-sweet fruits, for the Babble-Voice is attracted to its song, and where you hear the one you will often find the other. And for Heaven's sake, stay away from the fuming and furious creature that robs sentences of their meaning!"

Lines 9-12:

In line 9 of this stanza "sword" has assonance with the adjective "vorpal." This is a portmanteau which might imply the joining of the words "verbal" and "voracious," given the emphasis in the previous stanza on words (the "jabber" of the Jabberwock) and jaws. Thus it would seem reasonable to imagine that the son takes up his "voracious word-sword" to go out and do battle with a thing that misuses or abuses words: the "Babbler" or "Babble-Voice." The colon at the end of this line implies that the act of taking the sword in hand entails more than simply picking it up; it means engagement in the task, so that the sword is "in hand" while seeking the foe, and even while resting and thinking.

The adjective "manxome" in line 10, which is in assonance with the long "o" of "foe" could be interpreted as having something to do with "Manx," such as an enemy coming from the Isle of Man. Interestingly, "Manx" also refers to the ancient Celtic language once spoken on this island. Now hardly ever heard and no longer taught, the Celtic languages are characterized by their musicality. Thus, once again, there is an emphasis on the sound of language, rather than its sense. This is further picked up by mention of the "Tumtum tree," for "tum" is an onomatopoeic imitation of the sound made by plucking a tense string, accentuated by the alliteration of "t" sounds. With this understanding of the three nonsense adjectives "vorpal," "manxome," and "Tumtum," we can see the son or knightfigure armed with his word-sword against an enemy who

uses words for sound, waiting and thinking by a singing tree that might attract such an enemy.

It is in lines 9-12 of this stanza that the ballad of the Jabberwock can be established as an allegory about language itself. Carroll's background supports this because of his studies in logic and the concern for language that naturally goes along with that. This is further established by the associations of the sense and sound of language in the portmanteau words. Keep in mind that Carroll has "verified" the identical first and last stanzas as ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry, and that the "foe" to be dealt with is recognized in the third stanza as "manxome" or of a Celtic language-speaking race. Historically, the Anglo-Saxon language displaced the Celtic languages indigenous to the British Isles and became the precursor to the English language.

Lines 9-12 could be read thus: "The boy took up his hungry word-sword and went off on a long search for the foe who speaks the lyrical Celtic language, but eventually came to rest under the tree that makes a musical sound in the wind, thinking that the Babble-Voice might come this way, attracted by the sound."

Lines 13-16:

"Uffish" in line 13 is a likely combination of the word "huffy" meaning "arrogant," the word "offish" meaning "aloof," and perhaps the word "oafish," meaning "like a simpleton." In the following line the Jabberwock is described in stark contrast to the removed distance and coolness of the boy's attitude: "with eyes of flame" carries the connotation, or hint, of fire and passion.

"Whiffling" in line 15 is the first of two seemingly nonsense words, associated with things the Jabberwock does, which are in fact actual verbs. "Whiffling" means "to blow or drive with puffs of air"; it may be used as a figure of speech meaning "to speak evasively."

Presumably the boy is aware of the Jabberwock's imminent arrival as it comes noisily through the wood, which is described in line 15 as "tulgey." This is an adjective perhaps compounded of the word "turgid" meaning "swollen" (but also often used to describe language that is "grandiloquent" or "overblown") and the word "fulgent," which means "glittering" or "of a showy splendor."

"Burbled" in line 16 sounds like a portmanteau made up of "bubbled" and "gurgled," but is in fact a word that is onomatopoeic for "bubbled"; in addition, it is used figuratively as "to confound or confuse," as well as for its alliteration with the "b" and "r" sounds in "Jabberwock."

Lines 13-16 might be explained as saying: "The boy was aloof, thinking, when he heard the fiery and passionate Babble-Voice, as if blown by puffs of wind, come through the overblown and showy woods of its natural habitat; as it came, it made sounds without any possible sense or meaning."

Lines 17-20:

The double two-counts at the beginning of this line suggest that it is with two back-and-forth slashes of the sword that the boy slays the Jabberwock "through and through." The quickness of the action is further suggested by the internal rhyme of "two" and "through," as well as by the onomatopoeia of "snicker-snack." This is a portmanteau made up of "snickersnee," a word for "a large knife," and "snack," meaning "bite, snap," but also "a sharp remark."

Lines 17-18 could be paraphrased as: "The ancient Anglo-Saxon language met the even more ancient Celtic languages and very quickly and thoroughly, as if with a hungry word-sword and the force of incisive observation, displaced them. Thus the Celtic languages were no longer used and so did not grow and change, or *live;* the work of the world went on in Anglo-Saxon, which ultimately developed into the English language."

In lines 19-20 the boy has proved successful in the battle and takes the Jabberwock's head as a proof. He goes "galumphing" back, a verb made up by Carroll to mean "galloping in triumph." Note how the "uffish" of line 13 combines with "galumphing" to give a connotation of clumsiness, perhaps of an individual not particularly subtle or sensitive.

Lines 21-24:

The father asks the question in Archaic English, a reminder from Carroll that this is supposedly an ancient Anglo-Saxon legend. The question is presumably answered by the presence of the Jabberwock's head, and he calls his son to his arms for a welcoming hug, using the adjective "beamish" for its alliteration of the "b" sound. Carroll very likely intended the play on the word "son" in line 5 with "sun," making this word for "radiant" even more precise in its usage in this particular instance.

Line 23 contains joyful exclamations at the success of the boy. "Frabjous" is a portmanteau feasibly combining "fabulous" (in both the sense of "beyond belief" and "relating to fable") and "rapturous" (in both the sense of "ecstatic" and "being taken away"). Again, the musicality characteristic of a ballad is accentuated by the internal rhyme of "O frabjous day!" with "Callooh! Callay!" as well as by the alliteration with the hard "c" and "l" sounds. "Callooh! Callay!" at first glance appear to be two of what are perhaps four of the only true nonsense words in the poem (along with "Jubjub" and "Tumtum"). However, again taking into consideration the emphasis on sound in this poem and the emphasis on echo words in its composition, it would make sense to find something that sounds like these syllables (as with "Jubjub" and "jujube"). In this case, it might be suggested that the words are actually a type of portmanteau made up of "collocate" and "colloquy," so that the father's joy is at having things once again "put in proper order" ("collocated") by the death of the Jabberwock, and at having the Jabberwock's demise and his son's return make "dialogue" ("colloquy") between him and his son possible.

The word "chortle" in line 24 to describe the father's wordless joy at his son's return is made up of "chuckle" and "snort." Along with "galumphing" it is one of two portmanteaus in this poem which have come into the English language for valid use.

The sense of lines 21-24 could credibly be rendered: "The father welcomes his son on this 'fabulous' day—a day that will live in legend, a 'rapturous' day that will forever mark when the life was taken from the Celtic languages. The father welcomes the boy to 'properly ordered dialogue.'"

It is interesting to note that the father's joy, however, is expressed with "chortling"—a nonsense word that has now become a valid verb. In contrast, the verbs used for the Jabberwock in the fourth stanza that seemed to be nonsense were in fact valid words at the time Carroll was writing.

Lines 25-28:

See lines 1-4 above. The sense of these lines, repeated, might carry this idea: "In the world there is still, as always, the mix of joy and sorrow which it is possible for animals without language to express."

Themes

The Heroic Quest

Despite its seeming playfulness, "Jabberwocky" contains a very serious theme as old as literature itself (as seen in such ancient texts as *The Odyssey and Beowulf*). This theme is the heroic quest, in which a (usually) young male will strike out for parts unknown, encounter some horrific beast, and either triumph over this force of darkness or be consumed by it. The roots of the literary heroic quest reach as far back as Greek, Roman, and early Christian mythology, and examples include Jason and the Argonauts encountering all types of fantastical beasts in their quest for the golden fleece, Oedipus' victory over the vicious Sphinx to rescue the city of Thebes, and David's encounter with Goliath. The tradition of the heroic quest is prevalent in poetry as well as in drama and fiction, and this theme has long appealed to young boys (remember Jack, the Giant Killer?), who are expected to eventually strike out on their own and conquer their demons (personal or otherwise) in order to "prove" their manhood. Along with Carroll's memorable fabrication of imaginative new words in "Jabberwocky," the heroic quest recounted in the poem is a key reason why it remains one of the most popular (if not the *most* popular) examples of nonsense verse ever penned.

Indeed, once past the disorienting yet fanciful description of the opening stanza, the reader encounters a number of elements that are the heroic quest's stock-in-trade. These include fantastical and menacing creatures (the Jabberwock, the Jubjub bird, the Bandersnatch), ancient weaponry (the "vorpal sword"), the long journey into a dark forest where the hero's encounter with "the manxome foe" is to take place, and the mandatory return of the vanquished creature's head as proof of the heroic deed. In composing "Jabberwocky," Carroll clearly wanted to evoke mythical battles of long ago, in the knowledge that such action-packed episodes appeal deeply to the youthful audience he so cultivated.

Carroll is known for having directed much of his literary output specifically at young girls, whose company he is well-known to have preferred over that of young boys. "Jabberwocky," however, is clearly aimed more at young male readers, dealing as it does with the gender-specific theme of the heroic quest. The power of such archetypal material, of course, has by no means diminished in this day and age; one only has to look at the immense popularity of the *Star Wars* movies among male youngsters for proof of this fact. Yet it is important to note that at the time of the publication of "Jabberwocky," during the height of Victorian England, young men, more so then than now, were expected (and even pressured by their fathers) to undertake some type of heroic quest, whether it be for queen or country or for personal or familial gain. Back then, there weren't many people who questioned the ostensible validity of war and aggression under sanctioned circumstances, and such endeavors were even encouraged by most fathers of their sons. The pressure to be a hero, therefore, was very much in the Victorian public mind, and the greater the menace (i.e., the

Jabberwock with its "jaws that bite" and "claws that catch"), the greater the glory and paternal pride for the son.

Fantasy versus Reality

One of the remarkable things about "Jabberwocky" is how deftly Carroll synthesizes the worlds of fantasy and reality. Both worlds remain closely balanced throughout the poem, and readers can thank Carroll's close attention to poetic form for this clever balancing act. The danger with fantasy, of course, is that meaning and sense can get lost if the author creates a "wonderland" without any worldly touchstones or uses nonsense words in such a way that the overall effect baffles rather than enlightens. By mixing unfamiliar words such as "borogoves" and "frabjous" with familiar ones like "sword" and "wood," Carroll is able to kill two Jubjub birds with one stone. On the one hand, he can appeal to children's fascination with verbal sounds as well as their sense of playfulness, and on the other, he can transmit warnings to his youthful readers about the all-too-real dangers of the world around them.

Another key point to make with regard to this theme is how the poem's fantasy elements cast an unsettling, even threatening, shadow on terra firma ("terror" firma?). Ever the logician and champion of rational, civilized society, Carroll may be suggesting in "Jabberwocky" that anything irrational (i.e., "uncivilized") is to be feared and avoided. Of course, concrete representations of the irrational abound in "Jabberwocky": the Jabberwock, the Jubjub bird, the Bandersnatch. Such agents of chaos presumably dwell far from the safe confines of civilization, given that the hero must journey a long way to encounter the dreaded Jabberwock, and the fact that Carroll doesn't describe these creatures in much detail makes them even more mysterious and potentially terrifying to young readers. Indeed, to members of Victorian society, with its obsessive adherence to order and manners, anything that couldn't be categorized and thus "controlled" would be considered a threat to the desired social order.

Hence the poem's supreme irony. By giving the uncontrollable forces of nature names (e.g., Jabberwock and Bandersnatch), Carroll is attempting to gain a measure of control and order over an ostensibly irrational universe. Yet the names of these creatures are nonsense words that are themselves expressions of the irrational. Could Carroll be implying that the human mind, with its capacity for irrational acts such as the creation of nonsense words, is as much a threat to the order of things as any jaw-toothed, red-eyed denizen of the dark forest? Perhaps, perhaps not. Still, if the poet's mission is to use language to impose order on a seemingly chaotic world, Carroll appears to be carrying out this mission in "Jabberwocky," even if the world described in the poem is more fantastical than the one we're used to seeing in our waking lives.

Style

Any song that tells a story is a ballad. Originally intended for singing, ballads became "poetry" when the English poet Sir Walter Scott began collecting them to write down so they would not be forgotten. This is a typical form for stories about knights, which "Jabberwocky" purports to be, although it is considered a literary ballad, to be read rather than sung.

The ballad-stanza is usually four lines rhymed *abcb*, in which the lines have a syllable pattern of 8, 6, 8, 6. Note how the third, fifth, and sixth stanzas of the poem follow this rhyme scheme, with the others rhyming *abab*.

Carroll also plays with the syllable pattern, with each of the first three lines of a stanza having eight syllables and the last line six, except in the third stanza, where it might be said that the third line "borrows" a syllable from the last line. The effect of the 8, 8, 8, 6 pattern is that the shortest last line gives a sense of separateness to each of the actions described in the stanza, whereas the typical ballad syllable pattern creates a sense of anticipation that carries through each stanza to the end of the ballad.

A further structural characteristic of "Jabberwocky" is the use of what Humpty Dumpty in his explication calls "portmanteau" words, which are two words "packed up into one." Examples of these are "slithy" and "mimsy" from the first four stanzas. The sound of words, rather than meaning, is thus accentuated.

Sound is a major structural concern of the poem, strongly established by the use of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. "Callooh! Callay!" in line 23 is an example of the consonant sounds characteristic of alliteration: the hard "c" is initial alliteration between the two words, and the repeated "l" sound is internal alliteration. "Jaws" and "claws" in line 6 exemplify the vowel sounds of assonance. Onomatopoeia occurs with the word "snicker-snack" in line 18 to describe the sound of the "vorpal blade." The utilization of sound in these ways centers attention on the musical quality of the words, an emphasis particularly well-suited to the ballad form. Further underplay of the content meaning of the words through the consistent use of portmanteaus, as well as use of words completely made up, also enhances the musicality of the poem.

Finally, the poem as a whole may be seen as an allegory, in which the characters and the story have meaning as concepts and acts on another level.

Historical Context

Universal Appeal

Surely one of the most appealing factors in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is the sheer timelessness of the poem's setting. The boy's encounter with the mysterious Jabberwock beast has no specific reference point in history. This factor boosts the poem's universal appeal, for "Jabberwocky" is capable of captivating readers of any era —Elizabethan, Victorian, Industrial, Computer, or otherwise. Although the poem was written and published at the height of Victorian England, no special knowledge of that era is required in order to understand and enjoy the poem. Similarly, a reasonable facsimile of "Jabberwocky" could have been penned in any number of historical eras, given that the poem contains no noticeable references to Carroll, his life, or his times. A Roman scribe in Pompeii named Barnacus Frabjus could have written a "Jabberwocky" -like poem (and indeed, his readership, given its receptivity to the wildly fantastical creatures embedded in its mythology, would have eaten the thing up), as could have some beatnik bard given to opium-induced excursions on the page circa 1960. The point is, "Jabberwocky" transcends notions of time and history, and in having done so, the poem continues to increase its readership yearly by the thousands, if not millions.

Victorian England

Clearly, Carroll wanted his poem's narrative element (i.e., the boy's search for and encounter with the Jabberwock) to echo such mythological battles as Hercules' struggle with the Hydra, a ferocious beast with seven dragonlike heads. Carroll's main concern in the poem is the eternal battle between good and evil, and for many (if not most) readers, interpreting the poem on this level is enough. However, if readers look beneath the poem's surface, "Jabberwocky" can be interpreted in terms of the time in which it was written. Published as part of Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), the much anticipated sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), "Jabberwocky" made its debut at the height of the Victorian Era (1834-1901), when England was undergoing tremendous expansion in terms of power, wealth, and cultural influence. In large measure, England called the shots around the world at that time, and for other countries, such as war-beaten France, envy with regard to England's global superiority must have been running high. Indeed, in 1872, England was enjoying a renaissance the likes of which it hadn't seen since Elizabethan times.

The Threat of Germany

However, "barbarians" were rapping at the gates, so to speak. To the English, the Prussians (Germanic peoples) had long been viewed as a worrisome threat to the "civilized" world, and in January 1871, less than a year before "Jabberwocky" was published, Germany became newly unified under the Imperial Proclamation, potentially

tipping the balance of power in Europe and creating a sense of insecurity within Britain. To "defenders of the realm" like Carroll, the strengthening of Germany and its "barbaric" peoples would have, at the very least, created a certain uneasiness. This tangible fear at the time opens up an interesting potential subtext to the seemingly innocent "Jabberwocky." Could the Jabberwock, the Jubjub bird, and the Bandersnatch (notice how these names have a certain Germanic ring to them linguistically), all of which are portrayed as bestial, savage creatures in the poem, be the Germanic "barbarians" in disguise? Could the poem's hero (the boy out to prove his manhood) be a symbol of a Britain that needs to go out and tame the Jabberwock of a rising Germany? In light of the time's political environment, Carroll may have been subconsciously expressing a fear that many Britons would have felt in 1872.

It's important to emphasize, however, that interpretations such as the German and African connections to "Jabberwocky" discussed above may be thought-provoking but ultimately tenuous. Carroll, after all, was not the most politically active member of Victorian society, so viewing "Jabberwocky" in terms of the geopolitical machinations of the day may be reading too much into the poem. For instance, it has been well-documented that the first stanza of "Jabberwocky" was written in 1855, at a time when Germany wasn't seen by the English as such a big threat. Still, it may be naive and presumptuous to think that England's global chess game of colonialism in the Victorian era had no effect on Carroll, consciously or subconsciously. Concern was mounting in England over Germany in 1872, and ironically in the case of Carroll, such concern may have been warranted. As noted by author Anne Clark in *Lewis Carroll: A Biography,* Dr. Robert Scott, co-author of the *Greek Lexicon*, "wrote an excellent German translation" of "Jabberwocky" in February 1872, soon after the poem's initial appearance in *Through the Looking-Glass* around Christmas, 1871. Moreover, as Clark reports in her book, Scott claimed that his translation was the original and that Carroll's poem was the translation! Even then, it seems, England and Germany were girding themselves for a struggle—if not for control of Europe, then at least for control of the authorship of "Jabberwocky."

Colonial Africa

Germany wasn't the only source of concern for England in the 1870s, however. Along with other European states, Britain was deeply immersed in a chess game for control of strategic parts of Africa, and it wouldn't be long before the British and Afrikaners of Dutch descendency would battle over tracts of Africa in the first Boer War of 1880-81. Africa, interestingly enough, was a source of great wonderment for Britons around the time "Jabberwocky" was published, with new species of flora and fauna being discovered every year. British explorer Henry Morgan Stanley's highly publicized search for Dr. David Livingstone in the jungles of Africa was very much in the public imagination at the time. Stanley found Livingstone in 1871, the same year in which "Jabberwocky" first appeared in print, though the official publication date for *Through the Looking-Glass* is 1872. This popular fascination with the dark secrets of Africa may have influenced the verbal choices made by Carroll in "Jabberwocky." The Jubjub bird, the Bandersnatch, the Tumtum tree—are these descriptive, tonally captivating names all that different from

the names of real-life African species, such as the bongo and the tsetse fly, being discovered at the time?

Conrad's Heart of Darkness

This African connection also seems relevant to the poem's theme of the heroic quest in the sense that the hero (in this case the boy searching for the Jabberwock) had to journey often to the darkest, farthest reaches of the known world to slay the dreaded incarnation of evil, whatever it may be. And during Carroll's lifetime, no place in the known world was viewed as darker, more mysterious, and more potentially life-threatening than Africa. In fact, it wouldn't be long before the theme of the journey into the center of evil and depravity, as set in Africa, would be captured unforgettably by novelist Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which chronicles the journey of a character named Marlow down the Congo River in search of a madman named Kurtz, who has attained godhood status among certain tribespeople in the jungle. Kurtz and the Jabberwock are agents of evil and chaos whom Marlow and Carroll (in the guise of the boy) are trying to neutralize and thus control.

Critical Overview

"Jabberwocky," the central poem in *Through the Looking-Glass*, is typically categorized as a non-sense poem. It has, however, been taken seriously by writers, as well as by scholars of literature, logic, and language. For example, the portmanteaus in "Jabberwocky" are a primary element of composition adopted by the Irish writer James Joyce for his modernist novel *Finnegans Wake.* Indeed, Martin Gardner draws a compelling parallel between the poem and the abstraction of the modernist painting of Picasso; however, his conclusion that Carroll is concerned with the sound of words over the sense of words indicates a lighthearted play that many logicians and linguists would deny. What Patricia Meyer Spacks says about the seriousness of *Through the Looking-Glass* is typically categorized as a nonsense poem. It is specifically true of "Jabberwocky": that Carroll's singular gift is the ease with which he conceals the significance of the logic of his work, so that the amusing wordplay is simultaneously its profound logical center.

Carroll was himself a philosopher and logician. The prevailing opinion, nevertheless, is that his best logic appears in the *Alice* books. As the English critic Edmund Wilson has noted, the poetry and logic in Carroll's work are inextricably linked. Roger W. Holmes points out, further, that Carroll not only explores the very history of the English language in the nonsense word constructions of "Jabberwocky," but also examines how words come to have meaning. And in fact, English poet and critic William Empson has proposed that words may acquire meaning when, as in "Jabberwocky," they are so pleasurable to say and to listen to that they thus seem to make their own sense simply by their sounds.

John Ciardi, an American poet and critic, explores this phenomenon in *How Does a Poem Mean?*, declaring that words are not the only means by which we communicate; in fact, there is a musical force in language developed from the sounds of words. The most important of Ciardi's observations on "Jabberwocky" develops the notion that there is a dance to the music of the sounds of words going on beneath the meanings of words. This dance invokes image, mood, and gesture as a fundamental component of what he refers to as "the poetic performance" of a poem. For Ciardi the typical reading or "performance" of "Jabberwocky" as nonsense belies the meaningful comment it makes on a recognizable topic. He interprets Carroll's comic treatment of the hero and ballad in the poem as an allegory about the pretentious and stuffy Victorian times during which Carroll wrote. Clearly, there is validity in reading the poem as such a commentary, and in fact there have been several widely ranging allegorical explications offered for this poem. However, as Ciardi says, no poem is constructed of words by themselves, and individual associations of image, mood, and gesture will dance with the meanings of words to create varying interpretations of what any poem "means." Carroll's inventive wordplay in "Jabberwocky" has left room for interpretation of the poem along the spectrum from nonsense poem to highly specific allegory.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Saunders teaches writing and literature in the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, area and has published six chapbooks of poetry. In the following essay, he examines Carroll's need to impose order on the chaotic characters and language in "Jabberwocky."

In the history of literature, no writer was apparently more "sane" than Lewis Carroll, one of the most beloved children's authors in the world. On the surface, at least, Carroll struck his contemporaries as the paradigm of the rational, "adjusted" gentleman, one who was prized for his unflagging support of—and contributions to—British society in the Victorian era. Indeed, the numerous biographies and critical studies on Carroll all agree that unlike many poets in literary history, who either directly challenged the social order of the day or at least sought to live outside the accepted order, Carroll was very much an "insider" who would have considered upsetting the established order a foolhardy venture and perhaps even a gross, punishable offense. Here was no literary rebel à la French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire, American experimental poet e. e. cummings, or Marxist poet Pablo Neruda of Chile, but a committed acolyte of the status quo. To undermine the order and structure of Victorian society would have been unthinkable to Carroll. And yet, underneath that surface of manners and propriety, deep within the recesses of his subconscious mind, a repressed irrationality kept demanding expression, kept demanding to be *let* out. His great nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" reveals this to be true, as do such absurd Carroll creations as the Mad Hatter and the hookah-smoking Caterpillar from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). More than perhaps any writer in history, Carroll stands as a testament to the fact that things aren't always what they seem.

The theme of reality versus appearance has long been a staple of literature. Prime examples of works using this theme include *Oedipus the King* by Greek tragedy writer Sophocles, Othello by English playwright William Shakespeare, and *The Red Badge of Courage* by American novelist Stephen Crane. For a fantacist such as Carroll, this theme is essential grist for the creative mill. After all, a world in which *anything* is possible, such as Carroll's *Wonderland,* turns everything topsy-turvy in such a way that the visible world (appearance) seems merely a flimsy veil that, when lifted, uncovers the absolute truth of things (reality). Here's another way of "looking" at this idea: when you stare into a mirror, you are not seeing the truth or the reality of yourself, only how you *appear* on the outside to yourself and others. The mirror is like the skin of your body, revealing only that which can be seen (i.e., perceived), but if you could peer beneath your skin or through the mirror, thus piercing the veil of the visible world, you would see the absolute reality behind all things and know the truth. Is it any wonder, then, that Carroll chose a mirror in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) to return his Alice to that other, hidden world where the truth resides, where, as in dreams, we see things for what they really are?

Behind that mirror, behind that skin of glass, exists a land of infinite wonder, a world where the ordinary becomes wondrous and the extraordinary becomes commonplace. Like our dreams, this world seems chaotic and insane at first, but a certain logic almost

always manifests itself, a symbolic logic that eventually takes control of the dream and demands allegiance from the dreamer. A dream will often present a jumble of images early on, but usually some type of pattern will emerge before the dreamer awakens. Similarly, in *Through the Looking-Glass,* Carroll imposes order upon the chaos in the form of a giant chessboard, bringing rules and regulations to a land where none seemingly exist. Rationality and orderliness were of paramount importance to Carroll (his complaints about the unruliness of his young male students at Christ Church in Oxford, where he was a mathematical lecturer for many years, are legendary), and time and again throughout his body of work, Carroll creates situations where things seem to be wildly irrational and disorderly and then tries to impose order on the chaos. "Jabberwocky"—which first appeared in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), the book in which Carroll most tried to bring order to an ostensibly insane world—is no exception.

As noted by scholar Richard Kelly in *Lewis Carroll,* Carroll possessed three "qualities of mind—meticulousness, logicality, and orderliness—that made him "the genius of nonsense." Kelly goes on to say that in his nonsense writing, Carroll "implicitly acknowledges the terrifying absurdity and chaos of reality and proceeds to deal with it as if it were capable of control." This strategy is executed symbolically in "Jabberwocky" when the boy slays the frightening Jabberwock, a wild beast that, like Grendel in *Beowulf,* represents the dark forces of chaos and irrationality. By slaying the Jabberwock, whose name itself connotes mindless disorder, the boy (and, by extension, Carroll himself) brings the "chaos of reality" under control in a fashion. Viewed on another level, Carroll attempts to bring the irrational side of language under control as well, for the Jabberwock (emphasis on "jabber"?) represents not only the disorderly side of life on Earth but also the capacity of words to create irrational associations. This is what makes Carroll's choice of the title "Jabberwocky" so appropriate for the poem. Broken down into its constituent parts, the word suggests both the ability to *jabber* (i.e., mindless chattering) and that which is wacky, establishing a provocative synthesis that equates language (or at least its capacity for creating confusion and disorder) with the irrational mind. Seen in this light, then, the Jabberwock represents more than just the "chaos of reality"; it also represents the inherent chaos of language, a chaos that Carroll —as do other poets in their poems, nonsense or otherwise—wants to bring under control, to fit into logical patterns. In a sense, Carroll slays the Jabberwock of language in his nonsense classic, ensuring that control wins out over chaos in the end. Or does it?

In his examination of "Jabberwocky" in *Lewis Carroll,* Kelly cogently points out that the poem's "central interest □ is not in its story line but in its language." While the mock-heroic battle between good and evil is fun in its own right, this aspect of the poem deals with the known, with the familiar, and as such is unremarkable. Ultimately, it is the *unknown,* the unfamiliar, that really sparks the reader's imagination in "Jabberwocky" and that places this piece in the pantheon of nonsense verse. What it all boils down to is music, the universal language, and Carroll has not been given nearly enough credit over the decades for this component of his poetic writings. In the case of "Jabberwocky," almost all of the critical attention has been focused on Carroll's clever creation of so-called portmanteau words, in which two words are synthesized into a new one. The example from "Jabberwocky" used most often to illustrate this technique is *slithy*, which,

according to no less a literary authority than Humpty Dumpty, is a synthesis of *lithe* and *slimy*. Another portmanteau word, as suggested earlier in this essay, is the poem's title, a synthesis of *jabber, wacky,* and perhaps a dash of *mock* thrown in for good measure. This is all eye-catching in its cleverness and playfulness, but it's the very sounds of the words themselves—along with the syntactical and metrical patterns in which Carroll places them—that truly make "Jabberwocky" a memorable reading experience. More likely than not, it isn't the boy's heroic quest for the Jabberwock that young readers most recall but that incredible first stanza, so perfect in its nonsensical power that Carroll couldn't help repeating it as the poem's final stanza:

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

Aside from its loose iambic tetrameter structure (four beats of short-long stresses), this quatrain masterfully integrates a number of sonic and tonal elements crucial to good poetry. Among them are assonance (e.g., the soft "i" tone of "brillig," "Did," "gimble," and "mimsy"); consonance (e.g., the repeating "b" in "brillig," "gimble," "wabe," "borogoves," and "outgrabe" and the repeating "g" in "brillig," "gimble," "borogoves," and "outgrabe"); and alliteration (e.g., "'Twas" and "toves," "wabe" and "were," and "mimsy" and "mome"). Together, these elements create a highly kinetic fabric of sound and tonality, and without this most musical quatrain, it is difficult to imagine "Jabberwocky" gaining the popularity it has over time. True, "Jabberwocky" offers other memorable words and sound patterns, such as "burbled" and "O frabjous day!" However, they are nestled in a more understandable context (stanzas 2-6, where Carroll incorporates a greater number of common words to recount the boy's heroic quest) and thus lack the dense wallop of the first/last stanzas, which sacrifice nearly all meaning to pure sound. Today, as in the past, learning institutions encourage readers of poetry to look for meaning first and to subordinate all else to this investigation. In "Jabberwocky," Carroll playfully reminds us that, first and foremost, poetry is about the music—sound, rhythm, meter, tonality—of language and that meaning should always be a secondary consideration ("A poem should not mean / But be"—Archibald Macleish). After all, good poems have multiple meanings, and besides, if meaning were the be-all and end-all of poetry, how could nonsense verse even exist, let alone thrive?

And thrive it has, thanks in no small measure to Carroll. His influence can be seen in such twentieth-century poets as e. e. cummings (another master fabricator of new words), Gertrude Stein (who often stressed sound, rhythm, and repetition over meaning), and such committed Dadaists as Tristan Tzara who, in the years around World War I, wrote absurdist, nonsensical poems to reflect what they saw as the apparent meaninglessness of life on Planet Earth. Cummings, Tzara, and others like them saw themselves as literary rebels, questioning everything around them, from government and industry to the arts and religion. Frankly, these poets would have shocked Carroll, that standardbearer of the status quo. Carroll would have undoubtedly seen their verbal attacks on the social order as "bad form." Of course, much transpired between 1872 (the year "Jabberwocky" was published and a relatively tranquil year for

England) and World War I, when all hell broke loose around the world, when the many transgressions of Western civilization at the time became too blatant to ignore. For Carroll, though, Western civilization, guided over by the then-powerful Britain, made all the "sense" in the world. Which makes a poem like "Jabberwocky" even more remarkable. In his poem, Carroll may have tried to bring the irrational Jabberwock under rational control, but at poem's end, those "slithy toves" are still gyrating and gimbling "in the wabe," suggesting that at least subconsciously, even Carroll knew that the irrational side of life is too strong and constant to be fully controlled. Perhaps he even secretly wished that it would never be.

Source: Cliff Saunders, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Witcover's fiction and critical essays appear regularly in magazines and online. In the following essay, he examines the relationship between sense and nonsense in Lewis Carroll's poem, "Jabberwocky."

What is one to make of Carroll's "Jabberwocky"? As Alice herself remarks in *Through the Looking-Glass* after reading the poem for the first time, "It seems very pretty □ but it's rather hard to understand! □ Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!"

Anyone who has read this masterpiece of nonsense verse, which has mystified, amused, and inspired generations of children and adults, can sympathize with Alice's reaction. "Jabberwocky" rarely fails to inspire equal measures of puzzlement, anxiety, and delight in any but the dullest of readers. Indeed, these qualities seem to mutually reinforce each other, so that the less a reader understands exactly what the poem is about, in a traditional sense, the more he or she enjoys it. The more a reader enjoys it, the more he or she is driven to understand it, to devise (in the manner of Humpty Dumpty) rational explanations not only for its content but for its stimulating effect on the senses and the intellect. These explanations, however ingenious (or tedious), are always more or less failures, however, and the cycle begins anew. The result can be an enchantment that lasts a lifetime. Some of the greatest artists and writers of the twentieth century have acknowledged a debt to "Jabberwocky" and the other creative works of Carroll, among them James Joyce (whose masterpiece *Finnegans* Wake is rich in Carrollian allusions) and Vladimir Nabokov (author of Lolita, who translated *Alice in Wonderland* into his native Russian). Carroll's influence is evident in the Surrealist and Dadaist movements of the 1920s and 30s and has even been detected in the Cubist style of painting developed by the artists Picasso and Braque. ("Now if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance," Humpty Dumpty helpfully suggests to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass.*) After World War II, writer and artist Theodore Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, brought the anarchic spirit of Carrollian nonsense back into the realm of children's books, and in the 1960s, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* became a kind of Bible—old testament and new—to elements of the counterculture. At present, Carroll's creative imagination has permeated every nook and cranny of popular culture, from music to movies to advertising. In fact, it has been estimated that only Shakespeare and the Bible are quoted more frequently than Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the shy and stammering Oxford mathematician and logician who wrote under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll.

If every explanation of "Jabberwocky" is doomed to be more or less a flop, then why bother to write (or, more to the point, read) an essay about it? While it's true that the poem cannot be fully explained or neatly pigeonholed (and few good poems *can* be), that needn't be the aim of an essay □ and it's certainly not the aim of this one. But how to talk about what writer and critic Joyce Carol Oates, in her essay "First Loves: From 'Jabberwocky' to 'After Apple-Picking,'" has called "the greatest nonsense poem in English"?

A logical place to start would seem to be the word "nonsense" itself. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines "nonsense" as "[t]hat which is not sense or which differs from sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas □" But this is not quite as helpful as might have been hoped; it seems that to understand what is meant by "nonsense," we must first understand what is meant by "sense." Another trip to the *Shorter Oxford* yields "[m]eaning, signification □. The meaning of a word or phrase; □ the way a word etc. is to be understood within a particular context □" as well as "[t]he mental faculties in a state of sanity; one's reason or wits." Now we have something to work with. Sense has to do with meaning and signification—that is, with words, which signify or stand for things, and whose meanings coincide with the things they signify. Equally important for our purposes is the linguistic connection between sanity and the meaning and signification of words. Consider the word "chair," for instance. Everyone knows what a chair is and what the word signifies. Using the word "chair" to signify the object in which people sit is not only, as the saying goes, to talk sense, it's also preeminently sane; it reflects the speaker's acceptance of and participation in a cultural system in which certain rules are followed in speech and action to facilitate understanding between large numbers of people. What if, however, someone comes along who uses the word "chair" to refer to a different object, or to many different objects interchangeably, or as a verb or adjective instead of a noun, and calls the thing people sit in by another name entirely, such as "bathtub," or even a made-up word like "wubble"? Such an individual would be said to be "talking nonsense" and might even be labeled insane, perhaps with good reason. But setting such behavior and its unpleasant consequences aside, what if one were simply to repeat the word "chair" over and over again to oneself? What could be the harm in that? Try it and see. A curious phenomenon occurs in which the signifier (the word "chair") becomes separated from the signified (the object used by people to sit in), with an existentially dizzying and discomfiting result. A certain arbitrariness is revealed at the heart of language, which we normally use almost as thoughtlessly as we breathe air and take as much for granted as the earth beneath our feet. Viewed this way, the authority of a dictionary like the *Shorter Oxford* is undermined; this cornerstone of sensibility and rationality, on which the edifice of comprehensible language, and hence civilization itself, depends, seems not quite so firmly cemented in place as it once had. Indeed, the closer one looks, the more shaky the whole construction seems, as if the mere act of inquiring into the meaning and signification of words and language renders them increasingly unstable, and what we'd always comfortably assumed to be a fortress of sense turns out to be—to have always been—a Tower of Babble. Better, perhaps, not to look at all!

Carroll was not the first to discover (or rediscover, rather, for children instinctively know it) this strange and strangely alarming property of words not only to construct but to deconstruct reality, often simultaneously, but he was the first to apply the insight in literature in a systematic, consciously subversive (in other words, modern) way. This is what elevates Carroll's work above that of lesser but more prolific artists like Edward Lear; charming as Lear's nonsense verse (such as "The Owl and the Pussycat") undoubtedly can be, he is not in Carroll's league by a long shot. In "Jabberwocky" and other works, Carroll playfully reminded his readers (who, it should be remembered, were the children of the middle and upper classes of Victorian England, a society which enshrined concepts of good sense and rational order among its chief virtues) that at the

very heart of sense lies nonsense, that order can tip into disorder at any time, and that sanity is very much in the eye, or mind, of the beholder. "You may call it 'nonsense' if you like," remarks the Red Queen to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass,* "but I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!" Indeed. Or, as the Cheshire Cat laconically puts it in *Alice in Wonderland,* "[W]e're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

In the best of Carroll's fiction and poetry, nonsense and madness (qualities as closely linked as Tweedledum and Tweedledee) are not characterized so much by an absence of sense and sanity as by their abundance, if not super-abundance. In his essay "What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism," critic Michael Holquist observes that "nonsense, in the writings of Lewis Carroll, at any rate, does not mean gibberish; it is not chaos, but the opposite of chaos. It is a closed field of language in which the meaning of any unit is dependent on its relationship to the system of the other constituents." Critic Elizabeth Sewell expresses the idea more plainly, and less restrictively, in her essay "The Balance of Brillig": "Nonsense is a game with words." Few writers have played the nonsense game as skillfully as Lewis Carroll, and Carroll himself never played it as purely as he did in "Jabberwocky."

"Jabberwocky" appears in *Through the Looking-Glass,* first published in 1872, but its origins can be traced back to 1855. It was then that the twenty-three-year-old Charles Dodgson, in Misch-Masch, a magazine he wrote and illustrated for the amusement of his brothers and sisters, set down as a "curious fragment" of Anglo-Saxon poetry the opening stanza of what, seventeen years later, would become "Jabberwocky." The two versions are almost identical, with only small differences in spelling: "bryllyg" for the later "brillig," for example. As this essay will refer to the opening stanza of "Jabberwocky" in some detail, it seems a good idea to give it in its entirety:

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

In that 1855 issue of *Misch-Masch,* Dodgson thoughtfully appended a glossary for the edification of his siblings, and the meanings elaborated therein are also nearly identical to the explanations put forward by Humpty Dumpty for Alice's edification in *Through the Looking Glass.* There are, however, some notable exceptions. The meaning of the verb "gyre," for example, is given by Dodgson as to scratch like a dog, while Humpty Dumpty's far more satisfying definition is to spin like a gyroscope. In the case of almost every difference, in fact, Humpty Dumpty's explanations are the more successful as pure, inspired nonsense. But even if the younger Dodgson did not yet possess the mature creative imagination of his older alter ego, Carroll, he was no slouch in the nonsense department, as his literal English translation of the mock Anglo-Saxon verse, with its absurd echo of *The Song of Solomon,* demonstrates: "It was evening, and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hill-side; all unhappy were the parrots; and the grave turtles squeaked out."

This is an attempt, however ridiculous and satirical, to link the nonsensical words of the "curious fragment" to the normal, everyday world inhabited by Dodgson and his siblings. Humpty Dumpty makes no such attempt. He offers Alice no literal translation, offers her no bridge back to the other side of the looking glass; he merely explains the meanings of individual words with little or no regard for the sense of the passage as a whole. Many but by no means all of his meanings are derived from the application of what might be called the portmanteau rule, a portmanteau being a kind of suitcase. Here is Humpty Dumpty explaining the adjective "slithy": "Well, *'slithy'* means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as active. You see, it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word." Another example of a portmanteau word, according to Humpty Dumpty, is "mimsy," which he unpacks into "flimsy and miserable." There is a peculiar dreamlike logic to this system, which contains in a nutshell, as it were, the foundations of Freudian psychoanalysis. In fact, so reasonable is this method that two of Carroll's portmanteau words have entered into common usage and are now to be found in all English dictionaries: "chortle" and "galumph." (Even odder, and more confusing, words that seem to be portmanteaus invented by Carroll, like "burble" and "whiffle," have pedigrees long predating him.) Humpty Dumpty also derives meaning through the suggestiveness of sounds and/or spellings; thus, the already mentioned "gyre" / "gyroscope" explanation, and "mome," which he tentatively suggests as being "short for 'from home'—meaning that they'd lost their way, you know." Here, too, there is some recognizable system at work (as well as an entirely characteristic note of melancholy and anxious distress whose shadowy presence in the Alice books has led hard-hearted, soft-headed moralists to proclaim them inappropriate for children). Finally, as with the noun "rath," which Humpty Dumpty describes as "a sort of green pig," there seems to be no easily identifiable system at work at all, but rather pure, unadulterated fancy.

In the end, each of these systems of extracting meaning from words explains the poem equally well—which is to say, not at all. This is part of the game Carroll is playing with his readers, a game of nonsense that is also a practical joke (and like all practical jokes, a little bit cruel). He teases his readers with the perfectly sensible expectation that every puzzle has a solution, one which, when found, will explain everything, thus rewarding the effort made in searching it out in the first place. This expectation, sensible though may be, is also, as far as Carroll is concerned, dead wrong. The circumstances in which Alice first encounters the poem "Jabberwocky" are a perfect illustration of Carroll's sly method. Soon after passing through the mirror and entering the world on the other side, Alice discovers a book filled with strange writing in a language she doesn't know. It baffles her for a moment, "until at last a bright thought struck her. 'Why, it's a Looking-glass book, of course! And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again.'" Which of course is just what happens ("glass" being a synonym for "mirror"). *Voila!* The puzzle has been solved. Or has it? Although she can now read the words of "Jabberwocky" perfectly well, poor Alice can no more understand them than when they'd been written (from her perspective) backwards. Another practical joke along these lines is Carroll's habit, already mentioned above, of mixing real words in with the made-up variety in such a way that they're indistinguishable from each other. In *Alice in Wonderland,* the Duchess expounds to Alice: "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves." On the other side of the looking glass, the opposite rule

holds true: take care of the sounds, and the sense will take care of itself. As Alice says, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed something: that's clear, at any rate." But why is it clear?

To answer that question, let's forget for a moment that "Jabberwocky" is part of a larger piece of fiction, *Through the Looking-Glass,* and consider it on its own, as a poem. It turns out that it's a meticulously structured poem; a lot of craziness may be going on at the surface, but below the surface order reigns. To begin with, although the number of syllables per line in each of the seven fourline stanzas varies slightly from the average of 8, 8, 8, 6, the number of feet or stresses are an unvarying 4, 4, 4, 3 (the metrical pattern is iambic; an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). There is something inherently heroic and bestirring about this metre: it is the same used by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to begin his visionary poetic fragment "Kubla Khan," for example (with the minor difference that Coleridge uses five lines—of rhyme scheme a, b, a, a, b-to Carroll's four). What else? The second and fourth lines of "Jabberwocky" invariably rhyme. The first and third lines rhyme as well in the first, second, fourth, and seventh stanzas, giving a rhyme scheme there of a, b, a, b. In the third, fifth, and sixth stanzas, the rhyme scheme is a, b, c, b; however, to make up for the missing rhyme between the first and third lines in these stanzas, Carroll has introduced an internal rhyme into the third line: "he" and "tree"; "dead" and "head"; "day" and "Calay!" The firm skeleton of "Jabberwocky" aids Alice's understanding, and the reader's, by providing the reassurance of an underlying structure that can be fleshed out with multiple meanings.

Equally if not more important is the careful balance of sense and nonsense words in the poem, and the use of nonsense words in ways that allow readers to ascribe to them if not meaning, then *function.* Even if we don't know what the various words might mean, we can identify what parts of speech they are. For example, returning to the first stanza we find the unfamiliar words "brillig," "slithy," "toves," "gyre," "gimble," "wabe," "mimsy," "borogoves," "mome," "raths," and "outgrabe." A lot of unfamiliar words to digest! But we know more valuable things about them than Humpty Dumpty can reveal with his various methodologies of meaning extraction. Because of the internal structure or grammar of the English language, we know that "brillig," following the word "'Twas," is a noun. Similarly, we know "slithy" is an adjective because of the "y" ending and because it is modifying "toves," another noun. "Gyre" is a verb because it follows "did," and so is "gimble," while "wabe" is another noun. And so on. Joyce Carol Oates describes the operation of this process on young readers in "From 'Jabberwocky' to 'After Apple-Picking'": "For young children, whose brains are struggling to comprehend language, words are magical in any case; the magic of adults, utterly mysterious; no child can distinguish between 'real' words and nonsensical or 'unreal' words, and verse like Lewis Carroll's brilliant 'Jabberwocky' has the effect of both arousing childish anxiety (what do these terrifying words mean?) and placating it (don't worry: you can decode the meaning by the context)."

All of which is true enough, but too serious, perhaps. After all, "Jabberwocky" wasn't written to educate children, but to amuse and entertain them. If anyone has been educated by "Jabberwocky," it's been the adults of the world, though one could certainly argue that not nearly enough of them have learned its uffish yet frabjous lessons.

Source: Paul Witcover, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Levchuck, a writer and editor, has published articles on literature along with nonfiction essays and children's books. In this essay, she focuses on Carroll's "Jabberwocky" as the perfect portmanteau poem.

Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" has long been categorized as a shining example of nonsense verse. Carroll employs what is called amphigory, which is, in essence, nonsense verse that appears to have meaning but in fact has none. This classification, however, should not be taken at face value to mean that the poem hasn't any meaning. In fact, "Jabberwocky" is rife with meaning (and meanings, because of Carroll's introduction of new words). It conveys not only a tale but also offers a commentary of sorts not only on Anglo-Saxon poetry but on the literature of the Victorian era in which Carroll created. It is a poem that works on two distinct levels, conveying different ideas, making it a portmanteau poem. "Jabberwocky" works in two distinct manners, first as a stand-alone poem with rich imagery and a compelling narrative that comes full circle. Secondly, it serves as a commentary on the English language and literature, sometimes celebratory, at other times mocking their conventions.

The beginnings, literally, of "Jabberwocky" first appeared in the appropriately named periodical put out by Carroll's family, *Misch-Masch* in 1855 under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Carroll wrote and illustrated the issues of *Misch-Masch* almost exclusively for the purpose of amusing his younger siblings. What would become the very first stanza, then, of "Jabberwocky" appeared in the periodical as such:

"Twas bryllg, and ye slythy toves / did gyre and gymble in ye wabe: / All mimsy were ye borogoves; / And ye mome raths outgrabe."

Carroll generously provided some interpretation of the lines for his relations. As the poem grew into its later incarnation of "Jabberwocky" as part of *Through the Looking-Glass,* he supplied readers with an interpretation by allowing Humpty Dumpty to explicate some of the more obscure words' meanings. Of course, it has been long pointed out that Humpty Dumpty is a rather unreliable source. However, because of the manner in which Carroll used these new words (some of which are actually old words or variations thereof) which Humpty Dumpty deemed "portmanteau" words, it allowed readers to come to their own conclusions as to the meanings of the terms.

When used in *Through the Looking-Glass,* young Alice comes across the poem "Jabberwocky" in a book and can only read it when viewing its reflection in a mirror, or looking glass. Upon first perusal of it, Alice proclaims, "Somehow it fills my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something:* that's clear, at any rate—." When Humpty Dumpty offers his insight into the poem, he points out that the nonsensical words are "portmanteau" words; that is, two words placed together to form one word with a single meaning.

In its extended form, then, Carroll sets a rather idyllic scene, speaking of it being evening and talking of the creatures that inhabit the pastoral landscape. A father warns his young son of a mythical creature known as the Jabberwock, which possesses "jaws that bite" and "claws that catch!" He makes mention too of the other dangerous creatures that are associated with the Jabberwock. The son, perhaps in part out of his naiveté, embarks on a journey to locate the monster, stopping along the way to collect his thoughts. Before the boy can find the beast, it finds him. From the monster's noises, the boy realizes it is approaching and, using his sword, stabs and beheads the creature. He then returns home, triumphantly. The father is proud of his son's heroic efforts. The poem then repeats the first stanza, coming full circle to reinforce the fact that the earlier peace had returned and all was as it should have been.

The reason the poem is considered a nonsense poem, primarily, is its use of these so-called portmanteau words. For example, Carroll refers to the evening as "brillig" (changed from its initial spelling of "bryllg"), which is a reference, according to Carroll himself, of the time of broiling things, i.e., dinner. Other portmanteau words are slithy (first published as "slythy"&madsh;a combination of slimy and lithe), mimsy (the marriage of flimsy and miserable). Other words are not portmanteau words but rather hearken back to old English, such as borogoves (an extinct kind of parrot) and toves (a type of badger). It should also be noted that, when Carroll offered his explanation of his "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," he referred to the entirety of the initial idyllic scene (in which the raths ran out of their nests in the hills, in particular) as "an obscure, but yet deeply-affecting relic of ancient Poetry."

In looking at the story that is unfolding underneath the surface of these nonsensical words that blur the overt meaning of the text, it is easy to understand why "Jabberwocky" might initially be dismissed as simply a jumble of nonsense itself as, the title implies, it will be gibberish about the Jabberwock. However, there is a clear and distinct narrative, as discussed above. Furthermore, the structure of the poem itself has its roots in some of the most classical forms of poetry. For example, because of the subject matter of the poem, it may be likened to an epic poem, also known as a heroic poem, similar to that of *Beowulf,* in which the main character journeys to slay uber-beast Grendl. "Jabberwocky" also possesses the characteristics of a ballad (which is usually a song) in that it tells a story, usually of heroic knights. In a sense, then, "Jabberwocky," with its sing-song words, may be considered as something of a ballad. Also, the poem possesses some of the same qualities of the ballad in that certain stanzas contain rhyme schemes particular to the ballad (only the third, fifth, and sixth stanzas do this). On top of these devices, though, Carroll has added the element of mockery. This is evident in the fact that he injects seemingly absurd content into several classic forms of poetry, thus ridiculing the form and style of these types of poetry. Present too, according to some critics, is the device of allegory. An allegory refers to when symbolism is used to point to other things, thus infusing the poem with meaning on another level. Specifically, the poet John Ciardi, in his *How Does a Poem Mean?* posits that "Jabberwocky" is Carroll's veiled commentary on the confinements of the standard style of writing during the Victorian era.

The second part of Carroll's portmanteau poem is that it functions as a teaching manual not only for poetry in its references to established forms of poetry but in its treatment of language. While Carroll offers up explanations for several of the nonsense words in the poem, many can be discerned by simply deconstructing each stanza and looking at each nonsense word in the context of the part of speech it represents. Clearly, brillig is a noun and slithy is modifying the plural noun toves, who "were gyre[ing] and gimble[ing]"—both verbs—"in the wabe," which, because of its placement must be a noun. "Jabberwocky," in fact, is so famous for possessing this quality that contemporary teachers will use this fun, multidimensional poem as a way to introduce their students to the parts of speech.

Other important lessons of literature that may be imparted by a careful study of "Jabberwocky" include alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. Alliteration, which is the repetition of consonant sounds either in two (or more) words or syllables, is present in several ways. Carroll uses this device throughout the poem, specifically in referencing the "Tumtum tree," "snicker-snack," "beamish boy," "Callooh! Callay?" Onomatopoeia, a term that refers to the sound of a word reflecting its meaning, is also put to extremely effective use, particularly with the portmanteau words. Nearly all of these hybrid words belie their meaning simply by their sounds. Galumphing seems to imply a sort of triumphant galloping on a horse. Other examples of words whose sounds point to their context include burbled, uffish, and whiffling. Assonance, which refers to words having similar sounds, is present in the phrases "raths outgrabe," "vorpal sword," and "manxome foe."

"Jabberwocky," then, with all of its seemingly swirling confusion actually makes perfect sense. Its presentation in *Through the Looking Glass*—that it must be read by viewing its contents in a mirror (which is something that usually renders things illegible) and its nonsensical elements, may cause it to appear upon first glance to be a throwaway poem, something that Carroll rifled off with nary a thought. Upon closer examination, though, this multi-layered poem is a shining example of a portmanteau. Clearly, the fact that Carroll first introduced the work in 1855 and revisited it again in *Through the Looking Glass,* published in 1882, is evidence, together with the poem's complexities, that Carroll put much thought into constructing this famous verse. "Jabberwocky" works in two distinct manners, first as a stand-alone poem with rich imagery and a compelling narrative that comes full circle. Secondly, it serves as a commentary on the English language and literature, sometimes celebratory, at other times mocking their conventions. Elements and devices of literature are here aplenty and, thus, "Jabberwocky" can serve as a standalone entrée to poetry.

Source: Caroline M. Levchuck, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group 2001.

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Adaptations

In 1966, a television production called Alice *Through the Looking Glass* was aired. Those in the cast included the Smothers Brothers as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Jimmy Durante as Humpty Dumpty, and Jack Palance as the Jabberwock.

Jan Svankmajer has long been considered one of the world's most original and clever animators. His amusing (and somewhat disturbing) take on "Jabberwocky" was made in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), released in 1971, and runs thirteen minutes.

Donovan, a British pop star who had several hits in the 1960s, has song versions of both "Jabberwocky" and "The Walrus and the Carpenter" on his album *H. M. S. Donovan.* The album was originally released in 1971 on the Dawn Records label and was re-released in 1998 on Beat Goes On Records.

Another musical version of "Jabberwocky" appears on Marianne Faithfull's 1965 album *Come My Way,* released on the Decca label.

A videocassette entitled *The Hunting of the Snark [and] Jabberwocky* was released in 1999 by First Run Features. Although sections of "Snark" have been omitted, "Jabberwocky" has been included in its entirety.

A CD-Rom entitled *Lewis Carroll—Selected Writings with Illustrations and Readings* has been released by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. It contains *Through the Looking-Glass* and other major works by Carroll, as well as biographical material and readings by Sir John Gielgud in full CD-audio.

The Lewis Carroll Society of North America maintains the Lewis Carroll Home Page at http://www.lewiscarroll.org with links to other interesting sites.

One of the links for lovers of "Jabberwocky" is the site www.jabberwocky.com, which has all kinds of interesting items related to Carroll's poem.

Topics for Further Study

Compare "Jabberwocky" with Robert Burns' "To a Mouse, on Turning up Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785." Discuss how reading the made-up language in Carroll's poem can help you read the unfamiliar Scottish dialect that Burns uses.

How does this poem's structure—the *abab* rhyme scheme, the repetition of the first stanza at the end—make you accept it as a poem? Does anything with a poetic form qualify as a "poem"? What if, like "Jabberwocky," it tells a story from beginning to end. What is poetry?

Compare and Contrast

1871: At the end of the Franco-Prussian War, Germany becomes newly unified under the Imperial Proclamation. King Wilhelm I of Prussia is crowned emperor of Germany, establishing the Second Reich. Germany's sudden emergence as a national power is perceived in Britain as a potential threat to that country's political and economic interests.

1945: The Third Reich established under Adolf Hitler is crushed by the Allied Forces in World War II. Soon Germany is cleaved into two parts, with communist Russia dominating East Germany and Western democracies overseeing West Germany. This partition creates the socalled Cold War, which will last over forty years. 1990: Forty-five years after the end of World War II, the two Germanies are finally reunited into one country. Under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Germany establishes itself as a global economic power.

1903: Just five years after Lewis Carroll's death, the first of many film versions of Alice *in Wonderland* is made by English film producer Cecil Hepworth. Primitive by today's standards, the ten-minute-long film is later preserved by The British Film Institute, though the film has noticeably faded in parts.

1999: A lavish new version of *Alice in Wonderland* (with segments from *Through the Looking-Glass*) airs on television. The production features many stars and remarkable special effects, with Whoopi Goldberg as the Cheshire Cat and Ben Kingsley as the Caterpillar. The technique of "morphing" is used to great effect in the scenes involving Alice's shifts in size.

What Do I Read Next?

Several of the characters in "Jabberwocky" make a return visit in Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* (1876). Like "Jabberwocky," The Hunting of the Snark is considered a masterpiece of nonsense verse.

Published toward the end of his life, Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and its sequel, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), have not enjoyed nearly the popularity that the two Alice books have. Still, these somewhat neglected books abound in fantasy and nonsense elements and offer some pleasurable reading.

Carroll, a lecturer in Mathematics at Christ Church in Oxford for many years, was as fascinated with logic as he was with fantasy and nonsense verse. For a look into this side of the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, his book *Symbolic Logic* (1896) makes for a thought-provoking read.

Although Carroll and his great nonsense-verse contemporary, Edward Lear (1812-1888), never met, it is widely believed that Carroll was greatly influenced by Lear's nonsense verse. An excellent choice for encountering Lear's equally zany world is *The Book of Nonsense*, originally published in 1846.

For a time, Carroll maintained a friendship and correspondence with the great English poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). Carroll, an early buff in the dawning age of photography, even took some photos of Tennyson and his family. For a look at the kind of "serious" poetry being composed in Victorian England, the kind of poetry that Carroll was never able to master, Tennyson's poems are widely anthologized and published in a number of hefty collections. A particularly comprehensive collection is Tennyson's *Poems and Plays* (1973).

While several anthologies of nonsense verse are available, a particularly choice one is *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse* (1979), edited by Gregory Grisson. The book offers poems by such nonsense masters as Carroll, Lear, Christian Morgenstern, A. E. Housman, and Walter de la Mare.

Further Study

Cooke, John D., and Lionel Stevenson, *English Literature of the Victorian Period,* Russell & Russell, 1949.

This is a comprehensive overview of the Victorian era's politics, science, religion, and culture. It explores the era's top English poets and fiction writers, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Carroll himself. The section on "Literature for Children" is somewhat threadbare, but overall, the book is a valuable resource.

Green, Roger Lancelyn, ed., *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll,* Cassell, 1953.

In 1854, Carroll began keeping a diary, which by the end of his life filled the equivalent of thirteen volumes. Nine of these thirteen volumes have been collected in Green's book, and they offer a probing look into the private life of Carroll.

Guiliano, Edward, ed., *Lewis Carroll Observed,* Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1976.

This is one of the most fascinating books about Carroll, his art, and his life. Edited by Guiliano for the Lewis Carroll Society of North America, the book contains unpublished photographs, drawings, and poems by Carroll as well as several essays about his varied artistic endeavors.

Guiliano, Edward, ed., *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration,* Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1982.

Guiliano does another fine job of pulling together fascinating material on Carroll and his art in this book. Among the many excellent essays in this collection are ones that explore Carroll's influence on the Surrealists and James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake and the importance of illustrator Sir John Tenniel in the success of the Alice books.

Tucker, Herbert F., ed., *A Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture*, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

Offering a huge collection of essays, this book covers all aspects of Victorian society, from politics and economics to theology and literature. Of particular interest is Claudia Nelson's essay "Growing Up: Childhood," which examines the Victorians' obsession with childhood and the booming market in literature for children during that era.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's􏰀For Students􏰀 Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on 􏰀classic􏰀 novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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