A Short Analysis of ‘Jabberwocky’ by Lewis Carroll

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A summary and analysis of Lewis Carroll’s classic nonsense poem ‘Jabberwocky’

‘Jabberwocky’ is perhaps the most famous nonsense poem in all of English literature. Although the poem was first published in Lewis Carroll’s novel Through the Looking Glass in 1871, the first stanza was actually written and printed by Carroll in 1855 in the little periodical Mischmasch, which Carroll (real name Charles Dodgson) compiled to entertain his family. Below is ‘Jabberwocky’ (sometimes erroneously called ‘The Jabberwocky’), followed by a brief analysis of its meaning. ‘Nonsense’ literature it may be, but let’s see if we can make some sense of the glorious nonsense.

‘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.

In terms of its plot, ‘Jabberwocky’ might be described as nonsense literature’s answer to the epic Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf: what Christopher Booker, in The Seven Basic Plots, calls an ‘overcoming the monster’ story. A hero leaves home and goes out into the world in order to face down some evil; after encountering difficulties and tests of his bravery, he is triumphant and vanquishes his foe; and then he comes home again. It’s a story told again and again Jabberwockyin literature, from Beowulf to The Lord of the Rings. The structure of Carroll’s poem echoes this basic plot structure in two ways: through adopting the ballad metre traditionally used for poems telling such a story (that is, the four-line stanza, or quatrain form), and through repeating the opening stanza in the closing stanza, suggesting the hero’s return home after his adventure.

The poem is also a masterpiece of linguistic inventiveness: every stanza is a feast of neologisms – new words, coinages, nonsense formations. Several of them have even entered common usage: ‘chortle’ (a blend of ‘chuckle’ and ‘snort’) and ‘galumph’ (meaning to move in a clumsy way) are both used by many people who probably have no idea that we have Lewis Carroll to thank for them. (‘Mimsy’, too, is often credited to Carroll – though it actually existed prior to the poem.)

Indeed, as well as being a fine piece of imaginative literature, ‘Jabberwocky’ also demonstrates a central principle of language: what linguists call productivity or open-endedness, namely the phenomenon whereby users of a language can endlessly create new words or phrases. As Noam Chomsky has shown, users of a language demonstrate an innate linguistic creativity from a young age, and this is how children are able to pick up a new language relatively quickly: they learn not simply by acquiring knowledge, but by using an in-built talent for spotting how words are put together to form meaningful utterances. If something is both lithe and slimy, why not combine the two words – both their sounds and their meanings – to create slithy? The second word of the poem, ‘brillig’, is a word for ‘four o’clock in the afternoon’, the time when people begin boiling things for dinner (as Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice in Through the Looking-Glass in his analysis of the words, when she asks him what the words of the poem mean).

For more information about what individual words of the poem mean, see Humpty Dumpty’s explanation of ‘Jabberwocky’ from Through the Looking-Glass. Continue your odyssey into the world of nonsense verse with our discussion of Edward Lear’s ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’.