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“Jabberwocky”: Nonsense Language in Relation to a Moral of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, “Jabberwocky” was introduced to the main character, Alice, in a “looking-glass book,” meaning that it was on the page backwards and had to be held up to a mirror to be read (Carroll). *Through the Looking-Glass* was first published in 1871 as a sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. It is set in November on a snowy, wintry night and “uses frequent changes in time and spatial directions as a plot device, and draws on the imagery of chess” (“Through”). “Jabberwocky” began as a one stanza poem that Carroll printed in a periodical he created for his families amusement. He called it “Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry” and it went:

Tw’as bryllyg and ye slythy toves

Did gyre and gymble in ye wabe:

All mimsy were ye borogoves;

And ye mome raths outgrabe (“Jabberwocky”).

When it later appeared in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, critics began analyzing the poem just as they do most others. Most of them, however, analyze it

alone as a poem, when really it should be viewed as a part of the book as a whole and a contributor to the theme of the book.

“Jabberwocky” is a poem “about a boy’s initiation into manhood as he triumphs over the terrible Jabberwock, whose head he brings home as a trophy to his rejoicing father, it is at the same time about an initiation into the frightening thicket of language” (Goldfarb). Though when Alice reads it in the book, all she understands about it is that “It seems very pretty...but it’s *rather* hard to understand...somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t know exactly what they are! However *somebody* killed *something*; that’s clear at any rate” (Curzan 275). *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* are both about a young girl’s dreams of going to a strange land where she meets objects that are alive and goes on a dream-like adventure that seems like a lot of nonsense. Each has its own plot, but the general ideas of the stories are the same, and the themes of them resemble each other greatly. One big theme of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* is that things (and words) do not have to be defined as sensible to be real. The nonsense language in “Jabberwocky” is a huge contributor to the theme in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, that things (and words) do not have to be defined as sensible to be real and that we should keep our minds open to those undefined things.

Based on the poem’s beginning, there is no doubt that part of the reason for its being written was for amusement, however though many critics suggest otherwise, there is much more to the poem’s purpose. In an article on “Jabberwocky,” the writer analyses the poem with no connection to the book except when referencing Humpty Dumpty’s explication of the poem. She in no way connects the poem to the book’s theme, of which it has a large impact. She talks about Humpty Dumpty’s reference of the poem as a portmanteau. “You see it’s like a portmanteau—

there are two meanings packed up into one word (Carroll 271).” She also defines portmanteau as it applies to words: “A portmanteau is the opposite of a pun. Whereas a pun derives two meanings from a single word, a portmanteau uses two words to arrive at a single meaning (Heath 195)” (Goldfarb). Most of her analysis of the poem is about the portmanteaus of the poem and within it, rather than applying it to the portmanteau of the story as a whole and the connection that “Jabberwocky” has to *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. According to a textbook for language and linguistics, “meaning isn’t confined to lexical meaning: it develops from the relations of words, morphosyntax, and syntax in specific context, dependent also on relationships among speakers” (Curzan 203). Though there are many words in the poem that we do not understand, there are also many words that we do, most from closed morphological classes, meaning “words we use to organize sentences and larger segments of speech” (Curzan 203).

Looking specifically at the second stanza of “Jabberwocky,” we do not know what a “Jabberwock” is, but we know it has “jaws that bite” and “claws that catch.” And we know that someone is warning him by the recognized word “beware,” and we know it is his father speaking to him by the noun phrase “my son.” So when we break it down, the first two lines could be saying: “Beware the [thing], my son! The jaws that bite, and claws that catch!” We also do not know what “Jubjub” means, but we can say it is a kind of bird. And we don’t know what “frumious” means or what a “Bandersnatch” is, but we know we are supposed to “shun” it. So the second two lines of this stanza could be saying: “Beware the [kind of] bird, and shun the [kind of] [thing]!” All of the nonsense words are ones that are easily identifiable within a class. “Jabberwock” is obviously a noun because it has a determiner “the” before it. “Jubjub” is an adjective because it comes after determiner “the” and before noun “bird,” meaning that it is

describing the bird. “Frumious is an adjective because it ends in “ous” and comes before “Bandersnatch,” which is a noun because it is capitalized and comes after “the frumious.” Though the words make no definitive sense to us, we can figure out what it is saying without knowing what exactly it is saying it about (Carroll).

This not-really-nonsense language leads into the story because it applies directly to the nonsense theme of the book. Alice dreams of a looking-glass world where everything is backwards and its based on a chess game, and she doesn’t understand why it is the way it is, only that she must go somewhere. It is all completely random, much like the words in the poem, though it makes complete sense in her dream.

The nonsense language in “Jabberwocky” is a huge contributor to the theme in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, that things (and words do not have to be defined as sensical to be real and that we should keep our minds open to those undefined things. The book and poem work together to give us a sense of meaning to unidentifiable things and words. Most critics look at either one or the other, and what they were missing was the connection. Why was the poem placed in the book in the first place? There was a reason for it, and now we know it was to contribute to the book and its theme.

Works Cited

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