

Jabberwocky

'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.

LEWIS CARROLL

From *Alice Through the Looking Glass*



‘You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,’ said Alice. ‘Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called “Jabberwocky”?’

‘Let’s hear it,’ said Humpty Dumpty. ‘I can explain all the poems that were ever invented— and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.’

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

*‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;*

*All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

‘That’s enough to begin with,’ Humpty Dumpty interrupted: ‘there are plenty of hard words there. “*brillig*” means four o’clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin “*broiling*” things for dinner.’

‘That’ll do very well,’ said Alice: and “*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.’

‘I see it now,’ Alice remarked thoughtfully: ‘and what are “*toves*”?’

‘Well, “*toves*” are something like badgers— they’re something like lizards— and they’re something like corkscrews.’

‘They must be very curious looking creatures.’

‘They are that,’ said Humpty Dumpty: ‘also they make their nests under sun-dials— also they live on cheese.’

‘And what’s the “*gyre*” and to “*gimble*”?’

‘To “*gyre*” is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To “*gimble*” is to make holes like a gimblet.’

‘And “*the wabe*” is the grass-plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?’ said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

‘Of course it is. It’s called “*wabe*,” you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it— ’

‘And a long way beyond it on each side,’ Alice added.

‘Exactly so. Well, then, “*mimsy*” is “flimsy and miserable” (there’s another portmanteau for you). And a “*borogove*” is a thing shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round— something like a live mop.’

‘And then “*mome raths*”?’ said Alice. ‘I’m afraid I’m giving you a great deal of trouble.’

‘Well, a “*rath*” is a sort of green pig: but “*mome*” I’m not certain about. I think it’s short for “from home”— meaning that they’d lost their way, you know.’

‘And what does “*outgrabe*” mean?’

‘Well, “*outgribing*” is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you’ll hear it done, maybe— down in the wood yonder— and when you’ve once heard it you’ll be *quite* content. Who’s been repeating all that hard stuff to you?’

‘I read it in a book,’ said Alice. ‘But I had some poetry repeated to me, much easier than that, by— Tweedledee, I think it was.’

‘As to poetry, you know,’ said Humpty Dumpty, stretching out one of his great hands, ‘*I* can repeat poetry as well as other folk, if it comes to that— ’

‘Oh, it needn’t come to that!’ Alice hastily said, hoping to keep him from beginning.

‘The piece I’m going to repeat,’ he went on without noticing her remark, ‘was written entirely for your amusement.’