

## Living Literature – Making Sense out of Nonsense

*The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* by Lewis Carroll

A Poetry Unit Study by Maureen Wittmann

### Charles Lutwidge Dodgson

Lewis Carroll was born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson in Victorian England. He was born a son of a clergyman and later became a deacon of the Church of England. He was educated at Oxford, taking his degree in mathematics, writing prolifically on the subject, and spending the rest of his life at Oxford. He is best known for his books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872).

Carroll was happiest in the company of children. It was for his child friends that he wrote his books and poems. It was for them that he created challenging puzzles and logic games. He could reach into the minds of little children and delight them with his vivid imagination.

Without his love of children, combined with his love of mathematics and logic, his stories would have never been written, or at least they would not have survived the test of time. It is through the use of logic that we are able to find understanding, and enjoyment, in his nonsensical stories and poems.

### Nonsense Poetry

Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) is the quintessential nonsense poem. The poem is subtitled *An Agony in Eight Fits*. A fit is an old English word for canto, which is a term that denotes a part of a poem. At first glance, this poem may appear to be mere gibberish, but a closer look reveals much more. Gibberish is nothing more than unintelligible or meaningless language. A good nonsense poem does in fact have purpose and meaning, though it is not usually obvious.

Nonsense poetry, though absurd or preposterous, is usually written in a catchy meter with strong rhymes. It often contains neologisms or portmanteau words (see definitions below) and may employ unusual syntax as well. This makes the poem enjoyable. Instead of looking for deep meaning as you would in metaphysical poetry, or for deep feelings as you would in a love ballad, the nonsense poem is written for no other reason than to have fun.

Carroll was often asked if *The Hunting of the Snark* was an allegory, a political satire, or if it held some hidden meaning, but Carroll always insisted that his nonsense poem was just that – nonsense.

*The Hunting of the Snark* tells a dramatic story about an absurd assortment of ten distinct characters on a hunt for a creature that is known to rise so late that it breakfasts at five-o'clock tea and dines the following day. They search with great enthusiasm as they have only until dark to find the snark, filling the story with suspense. Though the poem is wacky, it is consistent. It is through this consistency that we begin to find understanding in the poem.

Conflict is also essential to the poem. The beaver must avoid the butcher, as he cooks only beavers. The baker is overwhelmingly fearful of boojums (though we learn that snarks are harmless creatures, there is one deadly variety – the boojum). Just as the baker overcomes his fear of boojums, with the help of the beaver, he comes to a tragic end when . . . well you will have to read that part yourself.

More famous than *The Hunting of the Snark* is *Jabberwocky* which can be found in *Through the Looking Glass*. In fact, it is the most famous nonsense poem in the English language. While *The Hunting of the Snark* is a lengthy poem, it fills a small book, *Jabberwocky* is only a few stanzas.

After reading *Jabberwocky* Alice states, "It is very pretty, but it is rather hard to understand! Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know exactly what they

are!” I think that quote also sums up *The Hunting of the Snark*, so just have fun with it and don’t try too hard to understand it!

### The Tools of Nonsense Poetry

Not all of these tools are used in *The Hunting of the Snark*, but it is good to be familiar with them, especially if one plans a continued study in nonsense poetry.

- **Portmanteau words** – This term refers to blended words. These are words that are made up by the author and are a blend of two or more words. Though the meaning may not be completely clear, there is some hint to the word’s function. The *snark* himself is a good example. Perhaps a snark is a cross between a snake and a shark, we are never told. However, we do know that the snark is some kind of animal and that it is being hunted throughout the poem. This consistent usage helps us to follow the events of the poem.
- **Alliteration**– is the repetition of a beginning sound, usually a consonant. For example: The big baby ate blue berries.
- **Neologism** – The use of new words or new meanings for old words not yet included in standard definitions. Some disappear from usage, others such as *hip* and *cool* remain in the language.
- **Nonce Word** – A word coined or used for special circumstances only. For example: “gerrymander” was coined to denote a voting district with an irregular shape, suggesting the shape of a salamander during the administration of Elbridge Gerry (then governor of Massachusetts). However, once gerrymander was adopted into standard usage it stopped being a nonce word.
- **Ricochet Words** – Hyphenated words that are usually formed by reduplicating a word with a change in the radical vowel or the initial consonant sound. Such as pitter-patter, chit-chat, riff-raff, wishy-washy, hob-nob, and so on.
- **Syntax** – The way in which linguistic elements (words and phrases) are arranged to form grammatical structure.
- **Meter** – A measure of rhythmic quantity, the organized succession of groups of syllables at regular intervals in a line of poetry, according to definite metrical patterns. In English the distinction is between accented and unaccented syllables. The unit of measure is the foot. Metrical lines are named for the type of constituent foot and for the number of feet in the line: *monometer* (1), *dimeter* (2), *trimeter* (3), *tetrameter* (4), *pentameter* (5), *hexameter* (6), *heptameter* (7) and *octameter* (8). Rarely does a metrical line exceed six feet.
- **Macaronic Verse** – Originally, poetry in which words of different languages were mixed together, usually for humorous or satiric effect. In modern times however, it is used most often with serious intent.
- **Conflict**. – A clash of actions, desires, ideas, or goals in the plot. Conflict may exist between the main character and some other person or person, between the main character and some external force--physical nature, society, or fate, or between the main character and some destructive element in his own nature.

### Activities:

Find a copy of Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* at the library or your favorite bookstore. The [Penguin Classic version](#) has useful notes and commentary throughout. The poem can also

be found on the Internet and printed out on your home printer (be forewarned it is 20 pages long).

First read the poem for enjoyment, then upon a second reading look for the tools of nonsense poetry and see how many you can find in *The Hunting of the Snark*.

Identify the portmanteau (nonsense) words in *The Hunting of the Snark*. First determine if they are nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Then use logic to figure out the meaning of the words by looking at their place in the poem and their consistent use throughout the poem.

Henry James Holiday was the original illustrator. Do the illustrations reinforce or undermine any particular meanings, rhymes, images, etc.? Which ones? How do the pictures shape your reading of the work?

Keep a dictionary handy and look up words that are unfamiliar. For example, a child of today may have never heard of a barrister. Of course, if the unfamiliar words are portmanteau words, you will not find them in the dictionary.

Check out [The Snark Puzzle Book](#) by Martin Gardner, which includes the original illustrations by Henry Holiday. Lewis Carroll was a mathematician and would have loved Gardner's "snarkteasers." The fun word and logic puzzles help with understanding of the poem. It is also a useful tool in using literature to supplement math studies. See the sidebar for an example of a "snarkteaser."

Make up your own portmanteau words.

Write your own nonsense poem. It should not be gibberish. Include at least three elements of structure (e.g. meter, rhyme, alliteration, etc.). Keep in mind the tools of nonsense poetry, listed above.

Seek out other nonsense poems. Edward Lear and Ogden Nash are popular authors of nonsense poetry. Dr. Seuss and A. A. Milne would be authors for younger children.

Like Carroll, Edward Lear lived in Victorian England. Though there is no evidence that the two ever met or corresponded, both are considered originators of nonsense poetry. [Castlemoyle Books](#) offers *Lear Limericks & Literature Lesson Plan* written by Beverly Gordon (author of *Spelling Power*, *Writing Power*, and *High School and Beyond*). The suggested grade level is 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but is adaptable for kindergarten through adult levels. The lessons use limericks to introduce a number of basic poetic devices.

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## Sidebar

From *The Snark Puzzle Book* by Martin Gardner (Promethueus Books):

Snarkteaser 59:

One of Carroll's many puzzle inventions was a word game he called Doublets. The idea is to take two words of different meaning, but related to each other, and try to change one to the other by altering one letter at a time. Every time a letter is altered, the result must be another common English word.

For example, this is how Carroll changed ONE to TWO:

ONE  
OWE  
EWE  
EYE  
DYE  
DOE  
TOE  
TOO  
TWO

The change should be made in the fewest number of steps, and the more familiar the words the better. The solution above requires eight steps.

One of Carroll's Doublets asked for a change of PIG to STY in just five steps. Can you do it?

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