

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

### The Jabberwocky

#### The Poet

Lewis Carroll is the *pseudonym* (false name) or *nom de plume* (writing name) used by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898). He devised it by changing his first two names into Latin – thus Charles Lutwidge became 'Carolus Lodovicus', and thus 'Lodovicus Carolus' – and then reconverting them into English versions: 'Lewis Carroll'.



Dodgson is most famous for his children's stories and nonsense verse, despite the fact that he never married and worked professionally in an area best known for its rationality and lack of humour.

Dodgson was born into a large family, the son of a clergyman. There were eleven children in all – Charles was the oldest. As a child, he loved to entertain his brothers and sisters with magic, puppets and poems. He was a gifted student, and went on to attend Rugby School, and then Oxford University. His talents in Mathematics were so spectacular that he remained at the



university as a lecturer. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1861, but never took up a church, and rarely preached. He was a painfully shy man, who was affected throughout his life by a terrible stammer. He lived as a resident tutor at Oxford for the rest of his life. He never married.

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For all his social awkwardness however, Dodgson got on extremely well with children. He was particularly attached to the young daughters of Dean Liddell, who was head of the Christ Church College, where he lived. One summer's day in 1862, he went boating with the Liddell girls, and Alice, his particular favourite, asked 'Mr Dodgson' for a story. He obliged, with a strange tale about Alice herself, who disappeared down a rabbit hole into a magical land. Later, he wrote it up and in 1865 it was published as ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*** (under his pseudonym). When it was published, it (and finally he) became famous. He followed it up with ***Through the Looking Glass*** in 1872.

Despite his fame, and the money it brought, Dodgson continued to live at Oxford and teach Mathematics. He went on to write much nonsense verse (of which 'Jabberwocky' is the most famous), as well as many serious academic books. He was a gifted photographer as well, and there are several celebrated photos of the real Alice (Liddell) as a young girl.





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'**Jabberwocky**', which appeared in *Through the Looking Glass*, is a kind of satire. It appears to be spoofing epic verse from Anglo-Saxon and other 'heroic' traditions. The celebrated twelfth century Old English (Anglo-Saxon) poem *Beowulf*, for instance, is about a young hero who slays a monster (Grendel). Because Old English is in effect a Germanic language, it is almost impossible to understand, unless you have studied the language for years. Carroll is partly mocking this sort of student difficulty, with all his marvellous invented nonsense words.

All told, there are 28 completely new words in the poem, out of a total of 144 (the last verse being repeated), or nearly 20% - and yet the poem still makes sense. Of these Carroll words, incredibly, four or five (also 20%) have entered the English language for good. We now hear people say 'burbled', 'chortled', 'whiffling', 'galumphed' and even 'frabjous', without necessarily knowing that Lewis Carroll invented them.

What Carroll did, cleverly, was to create words which obeyed the normal rules of English (chortle comes from chuckle and snort for instance), **and** insert his nonsense words into what are otherwise correct English verse lines. So 'slithy' is obviously an adjective, which describes 'toves' (like 'slippery toads'), partly because it echoes other familiar words (sly, slippery, slick, silly) and also because of the position of the word relative to the noun.



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The poem uses classic verse forms. It is rhymed quatrain (four line) verse, in iambic meter (each line has a soft/hard pattern of stresses – the normal pattern of speech and for instance Shakespearean verse). It is also a miniature narrative – about a brave knight who goes off to kill the horrible Jabberwocky. Thus, for all its crazy sound, it is utterly traditional in form, and actually makes perfectly good sense.



Why is it famous? Because it is so inventive, and yet so enjoyable. Because it involves wonderful wordplay. Poems are always about words, but rarely are they so much in focus as an art form as in '**Jabberwocky**'. Finally, because it is perfectly patterned, and dramatic, and short - it is wonderful to read aloud.

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## Reading the Poem The Jabberwocky Glossary of Words



bandersnatch	creature with snapping jaws
beamish	beautiful and hearty
borogove	a thin bird with feathers sticking out
brillig	four o'clock in the afternoon
burbled	bleat, murmur and warble combined
callay	hooray and congratulations
callooh	halloo and congratulations
chortled	chuckled and snorted
frabjous	fabulous and furious
frumious	furious and fretful
galumphing	galloping triumphantly
gimble	to make holes (like a gimlet)
gyre	to go round and round
jabberwocky	the monster, sharp beaked (jab) and slightly ridiculous (peacock?)

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## Reading the Poem The Jabberwocky Glossary of Words



jubjub	a desperately melodramatic and chaotic bird
manxome	monstrous and fearsome
mimsy	miserable and flimsy
mome	from home
outgrabe	bellowing and whistling
rath	a type of pig
slithy	slimy and lithe
toves	something like a badger, combined with a lizard and a corkscrew
tulgey	terrible and ugly
tum tum	big like a tummy, and solid like a drum
uffish	gruff, huffy and roughish
vorpal	victorious and awful (as in awe-inspiring)
wabe	the grass around a sundial
whiffling	whistling and sniffing

NOTE: It is believed that the Tum tum tree was based on a large and ancient tree with huge trunk and spreading branches that grew in the grounds of Christ Church, Oxford.



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### How to Read the Poem

**First verse:** verse low and sinister tone – very 'slimy' and spooky

**Second verse:** old man's voice, terrified of the monster

**Third verse:** 'heroic', but with deadly pace (this is the 'hunt' verse)

**Fourth verse:** huge contrast between the first lines (quiet) and the second, where the Jabberwock bursts on the scene (very dramatic!)

**Fifth verse:** the fight scene – lots of drama and vocal effects in the first two lines – followed by the wind down of the last two

**Sixth verse:** the welcome home hero verse – the old man is delirious with joy

**Seventh verse:** same as the first, as if nothing has happened (joke anticlimax)

