

Jabberwocky

From *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871)

Lewis Carroll

'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 whiffing 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.



Possible interpretations of words

While most of the vocabulary contained in *The Jabberwocky* are nonsensical made-up words, there may be some logic behind the authors usage and creation of them. Below is an outline of most of the terms used in the poem, along with supposed etymologies and the thought processes the author used to bring these words into being.

Take, for example, the word "*frumious*". While this **is not** an English word, and I would advise against including it in your school assignments or IELTS papers, if we look at how it is formed by way of combining the two existing English words *fuming* and *furios*, we are able to see or even feel the emotions that the author was trying to portray in his writings, and hopefully learn a few new (real) words along the way!

Actual English vocabulary that you may find interesting or useful is **highlighted in bold**.

- **Bandersnatch** (*n*) A swift moving creature with snapping jaws, capable of extending its neck. A 'bander' was also an **archaic** word for a 'leader', suggesting that a 'bandersnatch' might be an animal that hunts the leader of a group.
- **Beamish** (*adj*) **Radiantly beaming**, happy, cheerful.
- **Borogove** (*n*) Following the poem Humpty Dumpty says: " 'borogove' is a thin, **gaunt** and **shabby**-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round, something like a live mop." In notes Carroll describes it further as "an **extinct** kind of Parrot. They had no wings, beaks turned up, made their nests under **sun-dials** and lived on **veal**."
- **Brillig** (*n*) Following the poem, the character of Humpty Dumpty comments: " 'Brillig' means four o'clock in the afternoon, the time when you begin broiling things for dinner." Possibly derived from the verb to *bryl* or **broil**.
- **Burbled** (*v*) In a letter of December 1877, Carroll notes that "burble" could be a mixture of the three verbs '**bleat**', '**murmur**', and '**warble**'.
- **Chortled** (*v*) "Combination of '**chuckle**' and '**snort**'." (*OED*)
- **Frabjous** (*adj*) Possibly a blend of **fair**, **fabulous**, and **joyous**.
- **Frumious** (*adj*) Combination of "**fuming**" and "**furios**". Carroll comments, "Take the two words '**fuming**' and '**furios**'. Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever so little towards '**fuming**', you will say '**fuming-furios**'; if they turn, by even a hair's breadth, towards '**furios**', you will say '**furios-fuming**'; but if you have the rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say '**frumious**'."
- **Galumphing** (*v*) Perhaps used in the poem as a blend of '**gallop**' and '**triumphant**'. Cited by Webster as "*To move with a clumsy and heavy tread*"
- **Gimble** (*v*) Humpty comments that it means: "to make holes like a gimlet." (A gimlet is a small hand tool for drilling holes, primarily in wood)

- **Gyre** (*v*) "To '**gyre**' is to go round and round like a **gyroscope**." Gyre is entered in the OED from 1420, meaning a circular or spiral motion or form; especially a giant circular oceanic surface current. Carroll also wrote that it meant to scratch like a dog. The *g* is pronounced like the */g/* in *gold*.
- **Jabberwock** (*n*) Carroll has said: "The **Anglo-Saxon** word 'wocer' or 'wocor' signifies '**offspring**' or '**fruit**'. Taking '**jabber**' in its ordinary acceptation of '*excited and voluble discussion*', this would give the meaning of 'the result of much excited and voluble discussion'..."
It is often depicted as a monster similar to a dragon. In the above old image it has four legs and also bat-like wings.
- **Jubjub bird** (*n*) 'A desperate bird that lives in perpetual passion', according to the Butcher in Carroll's later poem *The Hunting of the Snark*. It might make reference to the call of the bird resembling the sound "jub, jub".
- **Manxome** (*adj*) Possibly '**fearsome**'; Possibly a portmanteau of "**manly**" and "**buxom**", the latter relating to men for most of its history; or "three-legged" after the emblem of the *Manx people* from the Isle of Man. It may also have roots in the word **manic**.
- **Mimsy** (*adj*) Humpty comments that " 'Mimsy' is '**flimsy** and **miserable**' ".
- **Mome** (*adj*) Humpty Dumpty is uncertain about this one: "I think it's short for 'from home', meaning that they'd lost their way, you know". Carroll's notes give a different definition of '**grave**' (via 'solemome', 'solemone' and '**solemn**').
- **Outgrabe** (*v*) Humpty says " 'outgribing' is something between **bellowing** and **whistling**, with a kind of **sneeze** in the middle". Carroll's notes suggest it is the past tense of the verb to 'outgrike', connected with the old verb to 'grike' or 'shrike', which derived '**shriek**' and '**creak**' and hence '**squeak**'.
- **Rath** (*n*) Humpty Dumpty says following the poem: "A 'rath' is a sort of green pig". Carroll's notes state that a 'Rath' is "a species of land turtle. Head **erect**, mouth like a shark, the front **forelegs** curved out so that the animal walked on its knees, smooth green body, lived on **swallows** and **oysters**."
- **Slithy** (*adj*) Humpty Dumpty says: " '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." Carroll originally notes that 'slithy' means "smooth and active"
- **Snicker-snack** (*onom.?*) possibly related to the large knife, the snickersnee.
- **Tove** (*n*) " 'Toves' are something like **badgers**, they're something like **lizards**, and they're something like **corkscrews**. [...] Also they make their nests under **sundials**, also they **live on** cheese." Pronounced so as to rhyme with **groves**. They "gyre and gimble," i.e., **rotate** and **bore**.
- **Tulgey** (*adj*) Carroll himself said he could give no source for Tulgey. Could be taken to mean thick, **dense**, dark.
- **Uffish** (*adj*) Carroll noted "It seemed to suggest a state of mind when the voice is **gruffish**, the manner **roughish**, and the temper **huffish**".
- **Vorpal** (?) Carroll said he could not explain this word, though it has been noted that it can be formed by taking letters alternately from "verbal" and "gospel". Make of this what you will.
- **Wabe** (*n*) The characters in the poem suggest it means "The grass plot around a sundial", called a 'wa-be' because it "goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it". It may also mean "the side of a hill (from its being **soaked** by rain)".