

A Study of the Literary Nonsense in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There

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Abstract: Nonsense Literature has always been an obscure viewpoint of literature studies. *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (referred to as *Through the Looking-Glass* hence) witnessed Lewis Carroll bring this peculiar genre into the spotlight. He designed a series of fictional characters and devised several poems on which he endowed the united characteristic of “talking nonsense”. This essay aims at analyzing the nonsensical discourse in *Through the Looking-Glass*, which includes nonsensical utterances, nonsensical poems, and illogical narrations. Starting with skepticisms from the proposals on implicature, the essay proceeds onto the Language Game theory of Wittgenstein, followed by the life story of Carroll himself and the analysis of a typical nonsensical poem. As the existing studies of Nonsensical Literature fails to merge the work with the man, this essay intends to establish a new method of cross referencing in order to achieve a more profound understanding of said literature as well as Lewis Carroll.

Keywords: Literary Nonsense, Language Game theory, Lewis Carroll.

1. Introduction

Through the Looking Glass as the latter half of the Alice series, is often regarded as the twin script of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Originally dedicated to a little girl, the two novels helped make Carroll's name in the world of literature. The book depicted a dream of the (perhaps older than) 7-year-old Alice, occurring chronically later than the dream of Wonderland, in which she went through a mirror into “Looking-Glass Land” where the people think and speak rather differently from people of the real world. As Looking-Glass land is basically a giant chessboard, she was granted the identity of a “white pawn”, and encountered various barriers from the first grid to the eighth where she became a third Queen in addition to the Red and the White.

Throughout the decades, densely depicted “gibberish” in Carroll's works had triggered the interest of scholars over time: the large amount of nonsense in the book includes language-plays in the characters' conversation, poems beautifully written and perfectly rhymed but didn't make sense, and the absurd narration including the distortion of time, space, and being; all of which seemed normal for a dream, but less than normal considering that this is serious literature.

In fact, Carroll's writing belongs to a specific genre, the “Nonsense Literature”, a genre which is often regarded as the specialty of the Victorian Era [1]. A parallel master of nonsense literature is Edward Lear. One “sense” of the word “sense”, as is highlighted by Wohlwend, states that sense is the link of modes with physical perceptual abilities, meaning that sense and order is closely bound

[2]. Hence nonsense, when opposed to common sense which is connected to other similar subjects' view of the world [3], is possibly chaotic, highly subjective, even private. For the story's sake, Carroll's nonsensical discourse "exemplifies the confusion of the child at the borderline age of approximately 7-9" [4].

Critique of literary nonsense, a cross between literature and philosophy, is not systematic; most of it relies on cross referencing (Ede [5]) owing to its complexity and ambiguity. The existing paradigm of its analysis is far from complete, which calls for a new method of merged analysis. Therefore, the theory would first apply Wittgenstein's existing theory to the text, with examples of the dramatic monologues and dialogue of typical characters. Further on, Carroll's life story could be referenced along with the analysis of the typical nonsensical poetry, "A-sitting on a gate".

In the research, research questions could be summarized thus:

- a. How does the nonsensical discourses contribute to the author's language and literature designs in the light of Wittgenstein's Language Game Theory?
- b. How does the historical and social backgrounds of the author indicate the design and purpose for his nonsense narration?
- c. How does the nonsensical poem "A-sitting on a Gate" assist in the conveyance of Carroll's personal attitude towards the society of his time in general?

2. Analysis with Language Game Theory

2.1. Application of Language Game in the Text

Wittgenstein's theory, namely "Language Game Theory", is one of the first to address the nonsensical writings. Wittgenstein had stated that language itself is a sort of game, depending on whole sets of rules to function properly. He suggests calling these rules 'language-games' [6]. Language Game theory proposes that the rules, together with their functioning, develops and defines the ideological society. Wittgenstein suggested in *Philosophical Investigations* that the whole process of using words be considered as one of those games for children to learn their native language.

However, the concept of "language game" drifts away from its literary sense, emphasizing the power of language on the reality, a power which is not confined to the grammatical structure and vocabulary of language; rather, it links closely to the "logic" that the hearer receives. It takes the semantic meaning of the sentence into surveillance, weighing whether the "logic" is acceptable in a broad sense. As Wittgenstein's example "milk me sugar" states, the orders 'Bring me sugar' and 'Bring me milk' both make sense, but the combination 'Milk me sugar' does not. However, the utterance of this combination of words can still have effect; its connotation is not deprived of by its semantic nonsensicalness [6]. In other words, it places the acceptance of the hearer over the original intention of the speaker.

This argument on the "sense of speech" is quite applicable for the study of the said topic from a pragmatical view. Wittgenstein had offered a method of approaching "sense" and "nonsense" from the acceptance of the speaker, which is what Carroll has been depicting throughout the Alice series. As is highlighted by M. Lemos and L. May, it is usually Alice who "stands aghast" at the face of nonsensical utterances, and it is Alice who perceives that the Hatter's speech doesn't seem to have meaning, yet it certainly is English" [6][7].

Considering that Lewis Carroll had indeed set up his "linguistic world view" based on "imitating the games everyone plays": As is stated before, *Looking Glass Land* is basically a gigantic chessboard, a different indication could be derived. It is obvious that the figures are the ones who coheres strongly with Language Game theory, who even intends to establish his or her world view based on language games, making their interactions nonsensical. However, it is the author who had designed them so.

By analyzing figures who function under language games, lights may be shed on Carroll's deeply rooted intention.

In total, seven scenes with nine characters have displayed certain degrees of nonsensical interaction: the garden of talking flowers, in which Alice meets the Red Queen, the twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the old sheep, Humpty Dumpty, the White King and the White Knight. Among them, classic interactions involving language games could be found with Humpty Dumpty and the Red Queen.

The character Humpty Dumpty is derived from a character of nursery rhyme. The Humpty in this novel has become a regular occurrence in linguistic analysis.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'", Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you, I meant 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less,"

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean different things,"

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all." [8].

Humpty Dumpty's speech bears much overlapping, violating the maxim of quantity in the theory of implicature, as is proposed by Levinson. His words, such as "you don't understand till I tell you" "neither more nor less" and "that's all", are all expressions of overlapping in semantic manner. To add to the confusion, Dumpty also demonstrates the ambition of "inventing" ambiguity of the English Language: he tries to declare that he has the power to "decide" the meaning of every word. To apply the acceptance logic of Language Game theory, Alice no longer holds the privilege of establishing her own language logic; By seizing ambiguity, Humpty is trying to forcefully feed Alice with the curious new rules forming the world view of the Land.

The Red Queen helpfully conveyed the nonsensical world view of Looking-Glass Land.

She (Alice) felt as if she would never be able to talk again, she was getting so out-of-breath; and still the Queen cried "Faster! Faster!" and dragged her along. "Are we nearly there?" Alice managed to pant out at last.

"Nearly there!" the Queen repeated. "Why, we passed it ten minutes ago! Faster!" [8].

The Red Queen's repeating Alice's words was rhetoric, meaning that "we did not pass it ten minutes ago", that "we're nowhere near it". But considering the follow-up, that the Looking-Glass Land needed its habitants to speed up to the next place, a further indication would be that they have indeed passed it a moment ago, but they still had to run at top speed to stay there, which indicates "nonsensical setting" at the basis of the story. Other than this, she commanded that Alice should pay thanks to her as she was "the majesty" and told her of an important principle of Looking-Glass Land: that of the mirroring indications (which the White Queen reinforced). Alice, being a normal girl from the other side of the glass, had failed to get the hint of power from her speech and appeared indignant.

2.2. Metaphors Generated by Language Games

Carroll has established excellent systematic metaphors. On the Looking-Glass chessboard, it is reasonable to say that the Red Queen is of a top status; she is, in fact, the commander among the participants of this "game". Humpty Dumpty, being an acquaintance in nursery rhymes ("Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall" quoted in the book is one of them), is cast as a non-participating character, "NPC" for short, in the chess game depicted in the book. This way, he is on a lower level and could command less in the game than the Red Queen. This malposition influences their manner of talking less than it does to their speech functions; for though both speaks commandingly, even arrogantly, the Queen is the one to set game rules, as well as language rules, for Alice to follow. Humpty Dumpty

along with Tweedledum, the Sheep, and the others, merely expressed earnest for Alice's following rules.

Moreover, the language game conducted during the two conversations are such that the two of them are trying to teach Alice about the language, believing that she does not talk in the Looking-Glass Land tongue, and trying to teach her in that way. It's necessary to point out that, although Humpty insisted that he knew the meaning of every word and every sentence, he was unable to establish joint connotation for the poem "Jabberwocky". Meanwhile, although the Queen insists that within the mirror, a thirsty person should have biscuit, she was unable to use the biscuit to genuinely "quench the thirst" [8]. Therefore, their application of language is more "game-like" than any we could see in the actual world. Every one of them insisted upon certain rules when they speak and requires Alice to do the same, but these rules, instead of conveying in uniformity, have directed themselves and Alice towards confusion and misunderstanding. This is, essentially, what makes the utterance and discourse "nonsensical", and what offers the "mirroring": in real life conversations, over-focusing on language rules and over-looking the necessary implicatures, united connotations, and the flow of conversation, often leads to misinterpretation and confusion.

This language game system also addresses the monarchy of Britain (both Queens were heavily depicted for Queen Victoria's sake), and fits it into the mini-world of chess. The idea of having the words of the monarch above that of the people is also a mirroring effect (with or without sarcasm) of this chess game on the democratic reality of Britain. Humpty Dumpty's inflexible and arbitrary attitude towards the rules creates a character of being stubborn and old-fashioned. Correspondingly, the role of Humpty and his closeness with the monarchy—the power—could be interpreted as the relationship between the monarch and the Jester, or the powerful and the timeserver in general. Therefore, Carroll's design of this dream land echoed elements of the 19th century society. As a mathematician, he designed delicate and systematic structures for his sarcasms and shaped them into the form of language games.

3. Analysis Based on Carroll's Life-story

Obviously, Carroll had merged his own interpretation of the society into his writing. Thus, it is helpful to peer into his life story and further interpret the clues as to his intentions of designing such a curious world supported by nonsensical rules.

Lewis Carroll, original name Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was born in 1832. His early life was led among 11 siblings, bathed in the love of the gentle mother. Childhood entertainment was barely an option, for his father's parsonage was in "complete seclusion" (Collingwood 1898). His mother was the first family member to be involved in his education. Charles had demonstrated his keen interest in theoretical books and writing at school age, and his mother granted him with her gentle and loving nature. He enjoyed his assigned school studies and was even eager for more diverse scope of knowledge, and landed in Oxford for his college studies. All these prepared him for a post of mathematics lecturer at Oxford later in life [9].

His acquaintance with Alice Liddell's father, Vicar Henry Liddell, led to the summer boating in July 1862, with the three girls, which famously triggered the Alice stories. He made up quite a few poems and parodies for their entertainment, and the stories were not meant for publishing at first. As is pointed out, Carroll seemed to have a gist for parody [9], which he used for creating those alternated and nonsensical names, dialogues, and poems in the books.

Carroll's life story before the Alice books was uneventful. Being bright and diligent, he used his wits for math and logics studies; and as he was a clergy man, he was unmarried for life. The difference of background makes it safe to say that his nonsense discourse could be distinguished from the "technique of narration" that the modernists and post modernists have put forth. Connected to his inspired work on ciphers and codes, it is more likely that his nonsense is loaded with hidden meaning

which he preferred to hide from direct inspection. The sound of words could also be suggesting deeper truth about language and literary meaning [10].

Carroll's settings for Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land are that of popular games, namely cards and chess. This echoes his preference for making up games in his childhood when no other entertainment is available [9]. Also, to conduct a game is regarded as a sense of control. This could be directed to different interpretations, but considering Carroll's academic interest and kind nature, it is probable that the games are a projection of the subconscious, that "even when writing in parody would I like to put them in an ordered surrounding". Finally, both the games have monarchs, especially the Queen, who is even the strongest piece on a chessboard (the setting of Looking-Glass Land). In the looking glass, both the Queens had major parts, while the Kings are more margined, one at the match and the other fast asleep. Considering that chess has become a sporting competition during the Victorian Era, Carroll's indications at the then-trending politics was clear. The gesture of nonsensical discourse, therefore, was more of an irony towards the social structure of chaos under a bird view of prosperity. For instance, the gesture of the Red Queen, telling Alice how to walk her step, and then disappearing before Alice could understand, could indicate the arbitrariness of the political system, where every man must fight for himself; while the White Queen, messy and forgetful, trying to make Alice believe in "impossible things", working time "backwards" when the finger is pinched, and finally turning into the Sheep, could also be irony for the make-belief and self-deception of the social and political setting. Other characters represent different identities and ranks, such as Humpty who indicates noblemen and elitists, and the Knight who was a common employee full of Don Quixote daydream.

4. Analysis of the Typical Nonsensical Poem "A-Sitting on a Gate"

Further analysis of the discourse would be based on the longest poem in the text, "sang" by the White Knight, which is the least nonsensical even though it streams with parody and irony. According to the Knight, the poem is "A-sitting on a Gate", but it is usually "called" "Ways and Means"; the name of the poem is "The Aged Aged Man", which is usually "called" "Haddock's Eyes". The verses of the said poem are nonsensical in that it included various strange expressions, seldom seen, or arranged thusly, in a realistic narrative poem. There are even word combinations so absurd that one would suspect that their usage was plainly for rhyming's sake (eg. Butterflies and mutton pies; macassar oil and toil; whiskers green and not be seen). The knight also demonstrates an air of not being able to follow up on Alice's implicatures, such as having strange interpretations for "fast" and "fasten", "being named" and "being called", and so on [8]. Basically, this is just another of the nonsensical stories, messing with images and ideas, that Carroll had been telling throughout the book. However, as is mentioned before, it is highly likely that the nonsensical narration is the façade of hidden information or theme.

The poem is the lyrics of a song which the White Knight offered to sing to Alice. Being narrative, it tells the story of "an aged aged man" by narrating a conversation, in the first-person "me", who is probably a young man. As Adam Rose points out, "nonsense" does not necessarily mean that the words are without "meaning". Rather, they result in "gaps of meaning", which could be filled by analysis [11]. Therefore, the poem would be analyzed in a manner of "close reading", of figuring out the details and connecting them to Victorian Britain.

The first point of interest is the narrative position of the characters. Although the young man kept asking the old man to tell him who he was and what he did for a living, hence pushing the conversation forward, he barely listened to the old man's tale. He was absent-mindedly "thinking of a plan to dye one's whiskers green" "feed himself on batter" and "boil it (a bridge) in wine" [8]. This creates a profound tragedy, for while the old man is pouring out his life story, there isn't any sincere audience. A lack of empathy constructs a "show" situation, where no one relates to the "actor" on stage no

matter how much he deserves to be heard and understood. This, in a broader sense, is a tragedy rooted in humanity where listeners rarely hear.

The actual life story of the old man is also worth pondering. Continuing to assume that the words are facades, the old man could not have turned “butterflies” into “mutton”, but he could have baked pies with one filling and told customers it was something else, or manufactured other things to sell and made morally flawed fortune. It is unlikely for him to set fire to hills and making macassar-oil out of it, but it is possible that the “toil” and “two pence earn” refer to the livelihood of workers during Carroll’s time, the early industrialization. “Macassar-oil” is a classic hair product and a production of industry; “Rolands’ Macassar Oil” implied big brands and advertisement. The old man could thus be sketched as an industrial world commoner, making a living out of his own hands, and working for big companies who probably underpays him. He, however, did not put forth these details to complain. He had an air of “whose look was mild, whose speech was slow, with eyes like cinders all aglow”, which was a gesture that he had moved on into a peaceful old age.

But the most crucial image which underpins the character of the old man is the image of “haddock’s eyes” [8], which he “searched for among the heather” and “made into waist-coat buttons”, for this is the one thing that he has mentioned which is totally isolated from the society. He said that he made buttons at night, and that he will not sell them for gold or silver. This suggests that there is an “exclusiveness” about these “haddock’s eyes” that he would not share with the common, commercialized world. He then said, however, that half a penny could purchase nine. This abnormal price tag, added to the privacy, suggests an exchange of other values between the old man and the purchaser; this way, “haddock’s eyes” are something that the old man holds on to, which suggests emotional attachment. Therefore, it is probable that he cherishes his “trifle”, holding on to them despite social conventions. This, directed towards the author, brings about the inferences and conspiracies of “what it is that Carroll holds dear in his heart”, which largely relies on guessing.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay leads from Wittgenstein’s arguments of language games to analysis of the nonsensical discourse in the Alice series, combined with references on Carroll’s life and full text analysis of the poem. Conclusions could be drawn on Carroll’s usage of nonsense: to convey irony and to inspire thoughts. However, as its former endeavors, this study fails to develop a systematic approach for nonsense literature. Further on, the studies could be directed into the systemization of this discourse and its relevance with the historical backgrounds.

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