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### Meanings in Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There"

"'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's rather hard to understand!'" (Carroll, 20). Often when one reads "Alice Through the Looking Glass" by Lewis Carroll, they may find themselves having similar thoughts to Alice. She, like the reader, often struggles to find her identity and follow the rules in this new world. Much of this is due to misinterpretation, which is experienced frequently in this novel by both Alice and the reader. Some would claim the novel is purely nonsense written for children, while others claim there is no use in even trying to interpret it. While it is full of situations one may only find themselves in had they consumed bright pink mushrooms they found in a forest, this does not mean it is purely uninterpretable nonsense. The themes and symbols of identity, games, and misunderstanding present in "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There," bring meaning to the novel.

"Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There" is the story of Alice, a seven-year-old girl living in the Victorian era. Her imagination often gets her into trouble, and as she doses off to sleep, she finds herself in a world like no other. Here she meets several fairytale characters, as well as the Red Queen and White Queen, who give her instructions along her way through the chess board. The chess board represents Alice growing up, and at the end of it, she will eventually become a queen. In her travels, she experiences new sets of rules in this new

world and encounters several poems and pieces of literature that she struggles to understand.

When she reaches the end of the chess board and becomes queen, a large party is thrown in her favor. At the end of the party she awakens and questions if the dream was reality.

Identity is a major theme in “Alice Through the Looking Glass.” It is a key piece to finding meaning in the novel. Alice experienced multiple identity issues in the novel. On two occasions in the novel, Alice spoke about names. The first occurred with the Gnat after the train ride. The Gnat asked Alice what the use of a name is. ““No use to them,’ said Alice; ‘but it’s useful to the people who name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?”” (Carroll, 43). The next occurs when Alice speaks to Humpty Dumpty. ““must a name mean something?’ Alice asked doubtfully.” (Carroll, 77). Aside from names, where Alice struggles to describe who she is, Alice is faced with identifying what she is. In the passage where Alice meets the Lion and the Unicorn, they question what she is. In reference to Alice, the Unicorn asks, ““What— is— this?” he said at last. ‘This is a child!’ Haigha replied eagerly.” (Carroll, 96). The Lion also questions what she is. ““Are you animal— vegetable— or mineral?”” (Carroll, 97). Through names and classification, Alice’s identity brings meaning to the novel.

Alice’s idea of a name brings meaning to the novel. When Alice spoke to the Gnat about the use of names, she pondered on the idea of names all together. Names certainly give people identities, but she also stated that they are there for the purpose of others. Gillian Beer stated in his book “Alice in Space,” “[Alice’s name] does, though, suggest that she is an English-language female, probably human.” Names can give us reference into who a person is. When Alice spoke to Humpty Dumpty, she pondered about the meaning of names. Is there a point in a name meaning anything, if, as she previously pondered, their purpose is for the use of others? Humpty stated, ““my name means the shape I am,” (Carroll, 77). So according to Humpty, a name should

represent one's appearance. However, this is obviously not the case, as Alice's name has nothing to do with her appearance. Again, in "Alice in Space" it is stated that "[A] proper name must indeed mean something, but not necessarily what its possessor imagines." (Beer, 158). Names are clearly part of identity, and as Humpty discusses, they must have a meaning, though the meaning can be anything that the person with the name decides. The idea of names is important to find meaning in the novel.

Alice's classification as a human brings meaning. Classification is ingrained into society. Humans classify and organize animals, plants, and other humans into boxes that fit what society believes they should be. When the Lion asks Alice "Are you animal— vegetable— or mineral?" (Carroll, 97), he is already presuming she is one of three things. Alice did not identify with any of the boxes the Lion gave her, so the Unicorn gives her a new one: the Monster. After this point, they refer to Alice as the Monster throughout the passage. This is a reflection of race, gender, and culture in the world's society. Many people have stereotypes and expectations for what someone should be, and when people do not fit into the pre-existent boxes, they become shocked. This can lead to major societal issues including racial tension, sexism, and ethnocentrism. Carroll warns against this behavior through Haigha. "'It can talk,' said Haigha, solemnly," in response to the Unicorn asking him about Alice. By using this language, Haigha shows Alice respect even though she is different. He tells the Unicorn to speak to her about her own identity. Carroll uses Alice's identity of what she is to speak against prejudice, bringing meaning to the novel.

Games and their rules in the Looking Glass world bring meaning to the novel. One of the overarching games in "Alice Through the Looking Glass" is chess. At the beginning of the novel, Alice is playing a game of chess. As she drifts into the Looking Glass world, the first

characters she meets are pieces of chess. As the story progresses, we found out that Alice is the White Queen's pawn, and when she reaches the final square, she will be a queen. "That's easily managed. You can be the White Queen's Pawn, if you like, as Lily's too young to play; and you're in the Second Square to [begin] with: when you get to the Eighth Square you'll be a Queen—'" (Carroll, 31). Other games commonly played in "Alice Through the Looking Glass" are word games. Jabberwocky is one example of a word game. It is full of portmanteau. After pondering for some time, Alice deduces, "Why, it's a Looking Glass book, of course! And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again.'" (Carroll, 19). Once figuring this out, Alice still struggles to understand it due to the word usage and game in the poem. By analyzing these games and their rules, meaning is brought to "Alice Through the Looking Glass."

Chess brings meaning to the novel, as it represents growing up. The novel starts out with Alice playing chess. As she progresses through the novel, she finds out the Looking Glass world is a large game of chess. Alice was told she would start out as a pawn and end the game as a queen, alluding to the rule of promotion in chess; when a pawn reaches the eighth square, it can be replaced with a piece of the same color. In this way, Alice grows; she becomes a more important piece. The irony in this exists as she was the only important piece in the game to begin with. "Although she is a pawn, the least powerful of figures in a chess game, the game itself yields and warps to make way for Alice." (Beer 46). As Alice grows, so does the world around her. She is constantly moving from place to place on the chess board and encounters many obstacles along the way. By the end of the novel, she has gone from a pawn venturing the world to a queen having a dinner party. Chess represents growing up in "Alice Through the Looking Glass."

Word games such as those present in “Jabberwocky” bring meaning to the work. When one first reads “Jabberwocky,” they may view it as nothing but nonsense. When a poem contains words such as “borogrove,” “vorpal,” and “galumphing,” one can understand this viewpoint. However, there is much more to “Jabberwocky” than it seems. Carroll wrote “Jabberwocky” to represent all of poetry. Alice began with having to figure out how to read the poem. Eventually she discovered she had to hold it to a mirror to read it. After, Alice said, “‘It seems very pretty,’ she said when she had finished it, ‘but it’s rather hard to understand!’” (Carroll, 20). Many readers share the same feelings as Alice does toward poetry; it is very beautiful, but when it must be interpreted, it is like a different language. Later, when Humpty Dumpty interprets pieces of it, both Alice and the reader come to appreciate the poem and see it in all of its beauty. Carroll uses “Jabberwocky” in all its confusing language to show the reader how poetry can be fun, bringing meaning to the novel.

Misunderstanding is a major part of “Through the Looking Glass,” and it aids in bringing meaning to the novel. Throughout the novel, Alice misinterprets poetry. In this way Alice represents the reader, who may not admit their misinterpretations. First, she does not understand “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” Alice struggles with choosing the best character. Tweedledee and Tweedledum try to explain why each character was wrong, and Alice eventually decided, “‘Well! They were both very unpleasant characters— .’” This is an example of Alice misunderstanding the poem and taking others’ interpretations as her own. Another point of misunderstanding took place when Alice heard Humpty Dumpty’s song. In this poem, Humpty Dumpty talks about fishes. “‘I’m afraid I don’t quite understand,’ said Alice.” (Carroll, 86). The misunderstanding of this poem brings meaning to the novel. The misunderstandings that take place in “Alice Through the Looking Glass” provide insight into the novel’s meaning.

“The Walrus and the Carpenter” is easily misunderstood, as it is a tedious poem to analyze. However, Carroll uses it to teach about developing one’s own ideas. Firstly, in the poem itself, the four young oysters go with each other, all thinking of “the treat,” while the older one “...did not choose/to leave the oyster-bed.” (Carroll, 55). The young oysters go with each other, as they all think of the same thing. More young oysters began to follow them, and eventually they fall prey to the Walrus and Carpenter. Carroll uses this poem to warn about going with the crowd and following others without thinking for oneself. When the poem finished, Alice struggled with deciding who the better character was. Without analyzing the poem on her own, she makes rushed analyzations. Tweedledee and Tweedledum explain to Alice how awful both characters were: “I like the Walrus best,’ said Alice.... ‘He ate more than the Carpenter, though,’ said Tweedledee....‘That was mean!’ Alice said indignantly. ‘Then I like the Carpenter best— if he didn’t eat so many as the Walrus.’ ‘But he ate as many as he could get,’ said Tweedledum.” (Carroll, 58). Alice decides that they are both wrong; however, she did not interpret this on her own. She followed what Tweedledee and Tweedledum were saying, misunderstanding that she should have analyzed the poem thoroughly and thought for herself. Though “The Walrus and the Carpenter” is a long poem, Carroll uses it to teach about forming one’s own opinions, bringing meaning to the novel.

Humpty Dumpty’s song works to get rid of misunderstanding through analyzation. Her excuse for misunderstanding his song is that she can’t write it down. “I will, if I can remember it so long,’ said Alice.” Humpty Dumpty wanted her to write it down as it is linked to the other poems about oysters. His song is left unfinished, leaving Alice and the reader wondering what it could possibly mean. However, Angelika Zirker stated in her article “‘All About Fishes’?,” that “...it is the double movement of going forward (from “The Walrus and the Carpenter”) and

going backward (from the White Queen's riddle) that is required [to understand the riddle]."

Carroll clues Alice and the reader in as this follows the main rule of the Looking Glass world: traveling forwards and backwards to get where one needs to be. Carroll used these linked poems to teach about analyzing literature. Without thoroughly analyzing all three pieces of poetry, the riddle to Humpty's song will never be answered. After analysis, the answer to his riddle is clearly oysters; though, this cannot be determined through his poem alone. Carroll uses these linked pieces to help dissolve the misunderstanding found in the poems. Analyzing the poetry and novel as a whole is key to unlocking the riddle, and Humpty's song works to prove this.

The themes of identity, games, and misunderstanding in "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There," give the novel meaning. First, Alice struggles with her identity. Her name and behaviors in the Looking Glass world signify finding one's own identity and growing up. Next, Alice sees the games in the Looking Glass world. Chess represents growing up, and "Jabberwocky" shows how poetry can be fun when it is interpreted. Finally, misunderstanding of poetry teaches about analyzation. Through analyzing the novel as a whole and in individual parts, Carroll intended to reward the reader with the answer to Humpty's riddle. He taught about the importance of analyzation through his writing. Anyone who reads "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There" can learn about their own identity. They can learn to make a name for themselves and grow up into that name. They can also learn about the importance of growing up and understanding poetry. Finally, they can learn the importance of analyzing literature, as well as analyzing personal experiences. Carroll shows the beauty of words. The themes he carefully weaved into his novel can teach any reader to enjoy literature.

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