

Claire Chee B077161 The White Knight's Song Close Reading

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Close Reading Exercise – The White Knight's Song by Lewis Carroll

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Fluidly cadent and regular in rhyme scheme, Lewis Carroll's *The White Knight's Song* is a narrative poetic discourse that reads like music, creating an atmosphere of playfulness and sentimentality. It is a prime example of nonsense poetry, consisting of an abundance of fantastical imagery in quasi-realistic contexts, but is delivered from the first person point of view of a narrator who exists within Carroll's imaginary world and therefore suspends the reader's disbelief with his personal promise to 'tell [us] everything [he] can' of his encounter (Carroll 1). Through analysing the narrator's depiction of the relationship between himself and the old man, as well as the contents of the latter's tale, this essay will argue that Carroll utilizes diction, structure and sound alongside nonsensical imagery to explore archetypal, complex traits of youth, truths about labour and the labyrinthine process of listening, ultimately forming a moral commentary on the effects of hubris and the nature of human experience (61).


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Flippant and mildly pompous, the narrator is characterized as self-important, representative of the benign naiveté of youth and constructed through the consistently cavalier tone of the poem, aided by Carroll's use of diction, imagery, structure and meter. The narrator questions the old man repeatedly about 'who [he is]', 'how is it [he lives]' and 'what it is [he does]', all the while letting the answers '[trickle] through [his] head like water through a sieve' (5-6, 38, 7-8). This behaviour encompasses several character traits, the first being that of childish aggressive persistence, echoing the stubbornness that is recognizable in toddlers as they ask rapid-fire questions without much comprehension. The second, more nuanced implication, is that of self-awareness; as this is his own recollection, the narrator readily admits that he is not paying attention, suggesting an element of agency instead of simple immaturity – choosing not to listen rather than lacking the capacity to. Despite this


understanding, the narrator '[thumps ¹ the old man] on the head' and '[shakes] him from side to side until his face [is] blue', repeating his questions every other stanza until the fifth (24, 36-37). The narrator's violent reactions towards the old man seem bizarre and unwarranted, congruent with the illogicality of nonsense but serving to highlight an underlying desperation of inexperience.

However, the constant iambic meter of the poem and regular rhyme structure¹ anchor the occasional turbulence of the poem, maintaining the narrator's primary tone of nonchalance and reinforced by Carroll's use of words in describing the narrator's preoccupying, nonsensical thoughts. Carroll describes the narrator as ¹ thinking of a 'plan to dye one's whiskers green and always use so large a fan that it could not be seen', a 'way to feed oneself with batter' to become exponentially fatter, and ¹ a 'design to keep the Menai bridge from rust' by boiling it in wine (16-20, 32-33, 57-58). Besides their illogicality, all three schemes imply vanity, with the first two concerning personal physical appearance and the last to do with the physical appearance of an external object. The use of the words 'plan', 'way' and 'design' also connote innovation and ambition, representative of the progressive, ⁵ enterprising spirit of a modern man (16, 31, 57). Carroll's use of nonsensical imagery such as dying one's moustache a garish colour only to hide it, indulging the childish desire to eat uncooked batter unendingly and preventing rust by means of boiling is augmented by his strategic use of diction, emphasising the ridiculousness of grand but hedonistic endeavours.

Aside from the inter-generational dynamics at play within Carroll's make-believe reality, ⁶ the didactic nonsensical imagery of the poem extends to the old man's tale itself, veiling contents that allude to the realities of labour with diction and sound. The first ² experience that the old man outlines is that of finding 'butterflies that sleep among the wheat' to 'make them into mutton pies' that he '[sells] in the street]' unto men who 'sail on stormy

⁷ ABABCD CD, until the final stanza.

seas' (8-10, 11, 12, 14). Carroll uses verisimilitude to create multi-layered nonsense to effectively communicate ideas without sacrificing whimsy; butterflies among wheat and mutton pie-making are separately realistic, but illogical once combined, harkening the reader to a dishonest business while sounding ridiculous. The sibilant consonance in 'sell', 'street', 'sail' and 'stormy seas' reiterates the sinister underpinnings of this trade, whether it is by making mutton pies out of non-mutton, or the act of being mercantile itself (12, 14). The old man also references his task of producing 'Rowland's Macassar Oil' by '[finding] a mountain rill' and '[setting] it in a blaze', only to receive 'twopence-halfpenny' for it (30, 27-28, 31). As a rill is a stream, setting it on fire is nonsensical, but ultimately also communicates a sense of the undertaking as being one of considerable difficulty, if not near-impossibility, making the fact that he is scantily paid a noticeable injustice and thus reminding the reader of the truth behind the adage 'overworked and underpaid'.  8

The old man goes on to describe how he '[hunts] for haddock's eyes among the heather bright' to make waistcoat buttons, another implausible, but perceptibly difficult task as fish eyes are also luminous, and would be camouflaged among the bright heather (39-40). However, Carroll uses this experience to make a separate point by mentioning how the old man does not sell the buttons 'for gold or coin of silvery shine', but opts instead for 'copper halfpennies... that will purchase nine [more waistcoat buttons]' (44-45, 47). The old man no longer worked solely for his 'bread', but had developed a conscientious work ethic, aiming to improve his trade rather than striving for monetary gain, a goal that is highlighted as unsavoury by the repeated, hissing sibilance of 'silvery shine' (15, 45). Finally, he details how he also '[digs] for buttered roll', '[sets] limed twigs for crabs' and '[searches] grassy knolls for wheels of hansom cabs' (48, 49, 50-51). The lexical field of the words 'dig', 'set' and 'search' connote more physical, lowly work than the old man had previously described,  9 its tedious manual exertion emphasised by the dissonance created by the varied hard

consonants such as in 'dig', 'twigs', 'battered', 'crabs', 'grassy' and 'cabs' (48-50). This, along with the other depictions of his lifetime of labour, demonstrates the old man's humility and tenacity for survival – a respectable, useful ethos, reflective of acquired insight over time, but seemingly wasted on deaf ears.

Additionally, Carroll's depiction of the narrator's self-indulgent fancies and his blasé, narcissistic attitude towards his senior's tale by means of diction and imagery are obvious foils to the old man's modesty and earnestness, reflecting further arrogance on the part of the former, commenting on each generation's tendency to believe their elders irrelevant. Before even beginning his anecdote, the narrator qualifies it, stating that there is 'little to relate' (2). While this could be read as a sign of modesty topos, it functions more to gently disparage the old man's experiences, writing them off as words of 'little' consequence. This is additionally supported by the narrator's chief appreciation for the old man '[drinking] to [the narrator's] noble health', ignoring his account of 'the way he got his wealth', demonstrating a rejection, albeit not a malicious one, of the old man's advice (63, 61).

The narrator's harmless mockery culminates in the ninth and final stanza as he describes how 'madly [squeezing] a right-hand foot into a left-hand shoe' would remind him of the old man (66-67). Again, Carroll subtly roots his nonsensical imagery in realistic terminology such that the senselessness of it occurs to the reader a bit more slowly, but with stronger comical impact; feet are never described as being right or left-handed, but Carroll's intended meaning of putting the wrong shoes on the wrong feet is instantly comprehended,

10 and the staggered understanding enhances the absurd nature of it. By associating the old man with this slapstick imagery, the narrator is shown to consider him a joke, and his dated story merely entertainment. In the same stanza, the narrator lists traits of the old man he 'used to know', an overreaching claim as he has not even bothered to learn a name, defining the old man thus far only by his age (71). This superficiality is reinforced as he describes the old man

purely by physicality, as having hair 'whiter than the snow', a face 'very like a crow' and 'eyes, like cinders, all aglow' (73-75). Carroll creates a lexical field with 'white', 'snow', 'crow' and 'cinders' that evokes wintery – and consequently deathly – imagery, cementing the notion that the narrator sees the old man as symbolic of the passage of time, and his story as one that will soon fade and become permanently inapplicable.

Conversely, the narrator's mention of how he will 'weep' to remember the old man suggests that the memory of his encounter 'that summer evening long ago' while ineffectual, is still one of emotional significance; Carroll's use of imagery, structure and word choice enhances his complex portrayal of the elderly from the point of view of the young,

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emphasising concurrent tendencies of irreverence and admiration (70, 81). This nostalgia is supported by anaphora in the repetition of 'whose' in lines 72, 73 and 74, and 'who' in lines 76, 77 and 80 to describe the old man, coupled with deviating from the pattern of alternating rhyme to consistently end on an 'o' sound for twelve consecutive lines from 70 through to 81. These two literary choices accelerate the pace of the final stanza, suggesting the great intensity of a potent, fond memory. Amidst the narrator's determination to remember only superficial traits such as the old man's 'look' and 'speech', he also briefly lapses into a singular substantive statement, noting that the old man had 'seemed distracted with his woe', again calling into question whether the narrator's offhand attitude belies a greater capacity for observation and comprehension, also alluded to by the inclusion of dropping a 'very heavy weight' upon his toe as an example of something that would remind the narrator of this encounter, indicating that he associates it with pain – a universally tangible reminder of reality, suggesting that he is aware of the gravity of the old man's story (72, 76, 69). The narrator's reception of the unglamorous truths spoken by his aged companion is maze-like, floating between dismissal and denial throughout the poem, but while there are complexities in the narrator's internal reception, the ending errs more on the side of overt disregard.

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Carroll concludes the poem by bookending the narrator's reminiscence by invoking the image of the old man 'a-sitting on a gate' that was present in the first stanza, the symmetry of structure reflecting Carroll's comment on the circuitous nature of human experience as each generation chronically fails to learn from their predecessors (82). The old man outlines several truths about accruing wealth that he has obtained from his years of existence such as compromised morals, disproportionate returns and the necessity of shrewdness and perseverance, but the narrator is shown to pay it little attention aside from remembering what had been said. Although presented with a tale that is both candid and substantive, the youthful narrator is prevented from learning from it by his own folly, and the 'aged, aged man' fails at imparting his painstakingly accumulated wisdom. The nonsensical reality in which the poem takes place is a vehicle for Carroll to impart a valuable lesson to the young demographic that the narrator himself is loosely grouped with; the poem can be seen to serve as a commentary on the dangers of complacency and misdirected ambition – a topic pertinent to the historical context of the poem, having been written in the late nineteenth century, hot on the heels of the industrial revolution and a wave of human achievement – as well as a simple parable in favour of the biblical virtue of having a teachable heart² (*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, 1 Pet. 5:5).

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Works Cited

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² 'Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'

- Carroll, Lewis. "The ¹White Knight's Song." *The White Knight's Song*. Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2017.

- ⁴*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001. Print.

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

85/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This is a brilliant essay that discusses youth, labour and communication via moral commentary in the extract. You start strong with a clear, concise argument throughout with effective signposting. You build on your argument without sounding repetitive, which for a close reading exercise is particularly sophisticated. You structure your essay with high levels of precision: the development of each point in relation to each other and the overall argument is highly sophisticated. I found your discussion of labour in the poem especially insightful and original.

You have an elegant writing style with a good command of complex ideas using a vocabulary which is advanced but not verbose. You also write about structure and rhythm with deftness. Overall, really fantastic work.

PAGE 1



Comment 1

Clumsy wording



Comment 2

Strong opening paragraph with clear line of argument



Comment 3

What's this in reference to? Not clear



Comment 4

Don't end
a sentence on a preposition

PAGE 2



Comment 5

Great point



Comment 6

This is very sophisticated analysis



Comment 7

This could probably be included in the body of the essay

PAGE 3



Comment 8

Great paragraph- combination of analysis of language and form with reference to your overarching argument



Comment 9

Great point

PAGE 4



Comment 10

Interesting point that really brings out the nuance of the poem

PAGE 5



Comment 11

This is an important point



Comment 12

Great point but sentence is too long

PAGE 6



Comment 13

This is really excellent work



Comment 14

This phrase is too colloquial

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