

Humpty Dumpty's Explanation

"You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir", said Alice. "Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem 'Jabberwocky'?"

"Let's hear it", said Humpty Dumpty. "I can explain all the poems that ever were invented--and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"That's enough to begin with", Humpty Dumpty interrupted: "there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon--the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

"That'll do very well", said Alice: "and '*slithy*'?"

"Well, '*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."

I see it now", Alice remarked thoughtfully: "and what are '*toves*'?"

"Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers--they're something like lizards--and they're something like corkscrews."

"They must be very curious creatures."

"They are that", said Humpty Dumpty: "also they make their nests under sun-dials--also they live on cheese."

"And what's to '*gyre*' and to '*gimble*'?"

"To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimlet."

"And '*the wabe*' is the grass plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?" said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

"Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*', you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it--"

"And a long way beyond it on each side", Alice added.

"Exactly so. Well then, '*mimsy*' is 'flimsy and miserable' (there's another portmanteau for you). And a '*borogove*' is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round--something like a live mop."

"And then '*mome raths*'?" said Alice. "If I'm not giving you too much trouble."

"Well a '*rath*' is a sort of green pig, but '*mome*' I'm not certain about. I think it's sort for 'from home'--meaning that they'd lost their way, you know."

"And what does '*outgrabe*' mean?"

"Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you'll hear it done, maybe--down in the wood yonder--and when you've once heard it, you'll be *quite* content. Who's been repeating all that hard stuff to you?"

"I read it in a book", said Alice.

--Through *The Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll