

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis
Carroll

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Introduction to a Masterpiece of Nonsense Verse

Few poems in the English language capture the imagination quite like **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll**. First published in 1871 as part of Carroll's beloved sequel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, this narrative poem has enchanted readers for generations with its whimsical rhythm, memorable characters, and deceptively simple story. At first glance, it appears to be a charming tale about two friends taking a stroll along a beach and inviting some oysters to join them. Yet beneath the surface of playful language and sing-song meter lies a work rich with ambiguity, moral questions, and enduring appeal. Carroll, whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was a master of literary nonsense, and this poem stands as one of the finest examples of the genre. Understanding why this piece has remained so

influential requires a closer look at its origins, its narrative structure, its characters, and the layers of meaning that continue to spark discussion among literary scholars and casual readers alike.

Origins and Context: The Poem in *Through the Looking-Glass*

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll

appears in Chapter Four of *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice encounters the poem while speaking with Tweedledee and Tweedledum. The twins recite the poem to Alice, who listens with growing curiosity and unease. Notably, Carroll originally intended to use a carpenter, a butterfly, and a barber as the main characters, but he eventually settled on the walrus and the carpenter for reasons that remain subject to speculation. Some suggest the carpenter was chosen simply because it fit the meter, while others believe there may have been a subtle nod to the moral and religious debates of the Victorian era. Regardless of Carroll's exact intentions, the poem fits seamlessly into the dreamlike logic of Wonderland and the looking-glass world, where ordinary rules do not apply and where things are rarely as straightforward as they seem. The poem's placement within a larger narrative about growing up, perception, and the absurdity of adult behavior adds another layer of richness to its already complex texture.

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll The Historical and Literary Context

To fully appreciate **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll**, it is helpful to consider the Victorian fascination with moralistic children's literature. Carroll was writing during a period when many children's poems and stories were designed to teach clear lessons about good behavior, honesty, and the dangers of disobedience. Carroll delighted in subverting these expectations. His nonsense verse often appears to promise a moral lesson but then refuses to deliver one, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. This refusal to moralize was both refreshing and unsettling for Victorian audiences, and it remains one of the reasons why Carroll's work feels so modern even today. The poem also reflects Carroll's deep engagement with language, rhythm, and the sheer pleasure of wordplay. He was a mathematician as well as a writer, and his poetry often exhibits a precise, almost mathematical attention to meter and structure, even when the content is deliberately absurd.

A Summary of the Poem

The poem opens with the walrus and the carpenter walking along a beach, lamenting that there is too much sand and too much scenery around them. They encounter a bed of oysters, and the walrus suggests

that the oysters join them for a walk and a pleasant conversation. The eldest oyster declines, warning the younger ones of potential danger, but the four young oysters accept the invitation. Soon, more oysters follow, and the walrus and the carpenter lead them on a long walk. When they finally stop, the walrus calls for bread and pepper, vinegar, and salt — and then reveals that the true purpose of the outing was to eat the oysters. The carpenter simply asks for his share. The poem ends with a somewhat hollow moral: the walrus expresses regret for what they have done, but the carpenter remains pragmatic and unbothered, and the oysters are left to their fate. This deceptively simple plot unfolds in seventeen quatrains, each maintaining a bouncy, hypnotic rhythm that contrasts sharply with the grim events being described.

Character Analysis: The Walrus, the Carpenter, and the Oysters

The Walrus

The walrus is perhaps the most compelling figure in **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll**. He is eloquent, persuasive, and emotionally expressive. He laments the state of the beach, charms the oysters with kind words, and even weeps after the feast. Yet his tears do not prevent him from eating the very creatures he has befriended. This

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll

duality makes the walrus a study in hypocrisy. He feels bad about what he does, but he does it anyway. His capacity for self-delusion and sentimentality without genuine moral action has made him a powerful symbol in popular culture. The walrus represents anyone who uses pretty words and emotional displays to mask selfish or exploitative behavior. His famous line about wishing he had talked more to the oysters after eating them captures this contradiction perfectly: he regrets not the act itself, but the missed opportunity for pleasant conversation.

The Carpenter

The carpenter serves as a foil to the walrus. Where the walrus is emotional and talkative, the carpenter is practical and economical with his words. He does not weep, he does not express regret, and he does not engage in elaborate justifications. When the walrus asks for bread and pepper and other condiments, the carpenter simply says, "But wait a bit, the oysters are all eaten up." He is focused on the task at hand and seems untroubled by any moral implications. Some readers have interpreted the carpenter as representing the cold, unfeeling aspects of industrial capitalism or religious orthodoxy — a figure who simply does what needs to be done without sentiment. Others see him as a more honest version of the walrus, unburdened by pretense. Carroll himself was asked about the difference between the two

characters and reportedly said that the walrus was the more sympathetic because he at least tried to make the oysters feel better about their fate.

The Oysters

The oysters are the victims of the poem, and their characterization is both tragic and slightly absurd. They are naive, impressionable, and all too eager to trust the friendly strangers on the beach. The eldest oyster wisely refuses the invitation, but the younger ones follow without question. They walk for miles, growing tired and confused, only to be devoured at the end. Carroll does not sentimentalize them overly much; they are, after all, oysters. But their plight raises uncomfortable questions about trust, gullibility, and the ease with which the powerful can exploit the vulnerable. In a broader sense, the oysters can be seen as representing any group that is led to its own destruction by charming rhetoric and false promises. Their fate is a darkly comic reminder that not all invitations come from friends.

Themes and Interpretations

Deception and Betrayal

The central theme of **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll** is deception. The walrus and the carpenter use friendly words and

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll

promises of a pleasant walk to lure the oysters to their doom. The oysters believe they are being invited to share a story or a conversation, but the true agenda is never revealed until it is too late. This theme resonates across many areas of human experience, from personal relationships to politics to business. The poem serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of trusting appearances and the importance of questioning the motives of those who seem too friendly or too eager to help. The walrus's tears after the feast only compound the sense of betrayal: remorse without restitution is hollow, and perhaps even more insulting than outright cruelty.

Gluttony and Exploitation

The poem is also a meditation on exploitation and consumption. The walrus and the carpenter consume the oysters without any thought to their well-being, simply because they have the power to do so. The oysters are treated as resources rather than as living beings with their own interests. This can be read as a commentary on class relations, colonialism, or environmental destruction. The walrus's sentimental regret does nothing to change the outcome, just as expressions of concern about exploitation rarely prevent it from continuing. The poem does not offer a solution; it simply presents the situation with all its uncomfortable contradictions intact.

The Absurdity of Moral Pretension

Carroll was a master of exposing the absurdity of moral posturing, and **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll** is one of his finest examples. The walrus tries to appear kind and thoughtful, but his actions are cruel. The carpenter does not even bother with the pretense. Together, they represent two different approaches to hypocrisy: the sentimental hypocrite and the unapologetic one. The poem seems to ask whether there is any real difference between them. By refusing to provide a clear moral, Carroll invites readers to sit with the discomfort of ambiguity. This refusal to moralize was radical in the Victorian era and remains a hallmark of the best nonsense literature.

Literary Style and Devices

Rhythm and Meter

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll is written in anapestic tetrameter, a rhythm that gives the poem its distinctive, almost hypnotic lilt. The four-beat lines with their da-da-DUM pattern create a sense of movement and inevitability, as if the poem is itself a kind of march. This rhythm is both charming and unsettling, especially when the content turns dark. The contrast between the cheerful, sing-song

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis

Carroll meter and the grim events described is one of the most effective techniques Carroll employs. It forces readers to confront the idea that terrible things can happen in a pleasant tone, and that bad news is often delivered in the most agreeable packages.

Repetition and Dialogue

Carroll uses repetition to great effect, especially in the walrus's speeches. The walrus's tendency to repeat himself and to use elaborate language gives him a Shakespearean quality, as if he is performing a soliloquy even as he commits a cruel act. The dialogue between the walrus and the carpenter is sparse but revealing; they rarely communicate about anything of substance, and their exchange about bread and vinegar near the end is both comic and chilling. The oysters themselves are given very little dialogue, which emphasizes their passivity and their status as victims.

Symbolism and Double Meaning

The poem is rich with potential symbolism, though Carroll likely intended no single interpretation to be definitive. The walrus has been interpreted as representing everything from the Buddha to the British Empire. The carpenter has been seen as a stand-in for Jesus or for the industrial working class. The oysters might represent the common people,

children, or any group that is led astray. The sand, the sea, and the moon all contribute to a dreamlike atmosphere that resists easy decoding. This openness to interpretation is one of the reasons the poem has endured. It can be read as a simple nonsense poem, a dark parable, a political allegory, or a meditation on the nature of language itself.

Cultural Impact and Adaptations

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll has had a profound influence on popular culture. The phrase "The Walrus and the Carpenter" has entered common usage as a shorthand for a pair of dubious characters. The Beatles famously referenced the walrus in their song "I Am the Walrus," though John Lennon later said he was not specifically thinking of Carroll's poem when he wrote it. The poem has been adapted into animated films, stage productions, and illustrated books. Its characters have appeared in everything from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* to countless parodies and homages. The poem's structure and themes have been borrowed by other writers, and its central scenario of the predatory invitation has become a familiar trope in literature and film.

The poem is also frequently taught in schools, where

The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll

it serves as an introduction to Victorian literature, nonsense verse, and the analysis of literary devices. Teachers often use it to spark discussions about ethics, persuasion, and the relationship between form and content. Its relatively simple vocabulary and regular meter make it accessible to younger readers, while its deeper themes provide ample material for older students. This versatility is part of what has kept the poem alive for more than 150 years.

Why the Poem Still Resonates Today

In an age of misinformation, political spin, and sophisticated marketing, the themes of **The Walrus And The Carpenter By Lewis Carroll** feel more relevant than ever. The poem speaks to the ways in which those in power use language to manipulate and exploit those who trust them. It also speaks to the human tendency to rationalize harmful behavior, to weep for the victims of our own actions without changing our course. The walrus is a figure of genuine pathos: he is not a monster, but he is not a friend either. He is something in between, which is perhaps more frightening than pure villainy.

Carroll's poem also reminds us of the power of literature to hold a mirror up to society without offering easy answers. It is a work that invites

interpretation, controversy, and ongoing conversation. It rewards rereading and reveals new layers with each encounter. Whether we