

## READING, TRANSLATING AND TRANSMEDIATING NONSENSE POETRY AS A SHORT FORM: THE CASE OF LEWIS CARROLL'S « JABBERWOCKY »

Lesson plan and Exercises composed for a BA level course in English literature « Reading and Translating Nonsense Literature »

Tested with a group of 20 students (teacher trainees and BA in English/ American studies) at the University of Szeged, Faculty of Arts, English department

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### FIRST STEP :

Before coming to class students read Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem « Jabberwocky » as a homework assignment. Listen to Benedict Cumberbatch's performance of the poem : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWusbCjHhZU>

## Jabberwocky

Lewis Carroll

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

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought--  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

One two! One two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"  
He chortled in his joy.

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



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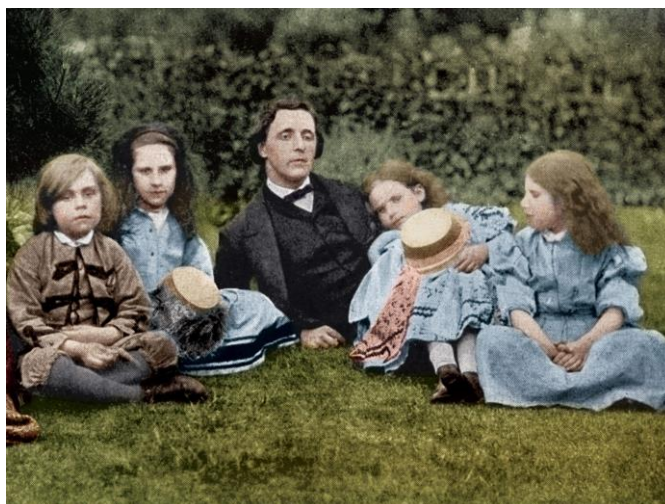
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### MINI-LECTURE ON BACKGROUND of poem : the author and the era

- Victorian era : epistemological crisis, conflicting belief systems (scientific, religious, fantastic models for interpreting reality)
- Victorian era as golden age of childhood ( ?) : ambiguities (differences in social status of bourgeois and working class children, cult of infantile imagination in Romanticism vs etiquette : children should be seen but not heard on the company of adults), fight for children's rights (Education Act), rising popularity of children's literature (dual audiences)
- Multimediality of Lewis Carroll's oeuvre : writer, photographer, mathematician, magician, pamphletist
- Controversies about Carroll's authorial figure



DISCUSSION about complexities of the Alice books (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865 ; *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872)

- publication history, rewrites, remediations
- importance of illustrations, picturebook design, by Carroll, John Tenniel, and other Hungarian artists, see link : <https://ieas-szeged.hu/downtherabbithole/keptelensegek/>
- combination of different genres, all subverted : anti-fairy tale, mock Bildungsroman, science fantasy, social critical pamphlet, ludonarrative, etc
- background reading. A. Kérchy. « Ambiguous Alice. Making Sense of Lewis Carroll's Nonsense Fantasies. » Does it really mean that ? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous. Eds. kaskacova and Dubbs, Cambridge Scholars, 2011. 104-122. [https://www.academia.edu/4738509/AMBIGUOUS\\_ALICE\\_MAKING\\_SENSE\\_OF\\_LEWIS\\_CARROLL\\_S\\_NONSENSE\\_FANTASIES](https://www.academia.edu/4738509/AMBIGUOUS_ALICE_MAKING_SENSE_OF_LEWIS_CARROLL_S_NONSENSE_FANTASIES)

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### focus on LANGUAGE GAMES

- background work : read Leila S May's article : "Language-Games and Nonsense: Wittgenstein's Reflection in Carroll's Looking-Glass." *Philosophy and Literature*. Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/213848/pdf>
- draft a typology of nonsense language games : portmanteau, neologisms, literalized metaphors, paradoxes, puns, play with sounds, etc
- identify these language games in the poem « Jabberwocky »
- the familiarity of the unfamiliar : identify the syntactic function of the nonsense neologisms in the poem (Colourless green ideas sleep furiously. – verbs, nouns, adjectives ?)

### ATTEMPT TO DEFINE NONSENSE : in-class discussion

- impossibility of meaninglessness and necessity of misunderstanding
- metalinguistic self-reflectivity and transverbal acoustic play
- we recognize meaning-making is taking place but there is something wrong with it
- defamiliarization
- Pair work : compare everyday occurrences and literary manifestations of nonsense (slip of the tongue vs literalized metaphor)
- infantile ludic aspect and mature ideology critical implications
- difference between gibberish, absurd

### FOCUS on JABBERWOCKY

- identify steps of intermedial transition : mirror-writing – poem (acoustic performance vs written text) – image
- identify types of creatures hybridized on Tenniel's illustrations – compare linguistic chimera of literary nonsense and visual chimera on Tenniel illustration
- TASK : look for other visual depictions of the Jabberwock : eg Tim Burton's cinematic adaptation portrays the beast as a dragon, Question : how is the meaning of the text modified by the different illustrations?  
background reading : Anna Kérchy. « Tracking the Transition from Verbal to Visual Nonsense in Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland » *Americana*. 2012. VIII. 1. <https://americanajournal.hu/vol8no1/kerchy>  
sample illustrations : <https://ieas-szeged.hu/downtherabbithole/sample-page/jabberwocky/>
- « Jabberwocky » as a metapoem (the struggle with monstrosity=the reader's struggle with nonsense language)
- problems of translating « Jabberwocky » : read and compare the Hungarian translations : how do the different translations modify the figure of the monster ? what are the linguistic solutions they implement to convert Victorian English nonsense into 20th or 21st century Hungarian ?  
READ and COMPARE the Hungarian translations here : <https://ieas-szeged.hu/downtherabbithole/sample-page/jabberwocky/>

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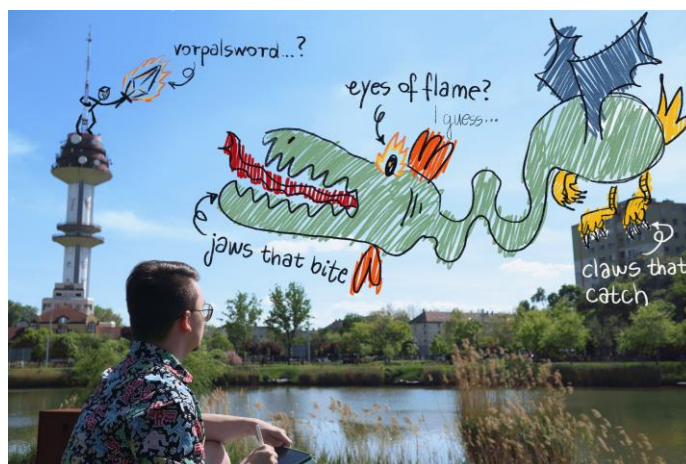
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FINAL SEMINAR PAPER to be submitted by the end of the term : Analyse the poem from 4 different aspects

1. TRANSLATION component: translate Lewis Carroll's « Jabberwocky » from English to Hungarian  
Preliminary work: study the Hungarian translations of « Jabberwocky » : <https://ieas-szeged.hu/downtherabbithole/sample-page/jabberwocky/>  
& study website on « Jabberwocky » variations, transliterations and translations : <http://www76.pair.com/keithlim/jabberwocky/index.html>
2. LITERARY ANALYTICAL component: write a 3 pages-long explanation of your own translation (explain the choices you made in your translation (domestication or foreignization method, why), compare (your translation) with the other Hungarian translations, comment on the interlingual (non)translatability of literary nonsense, discuss major challenges and your strategies of overcoming them) This component will necessarily be bilingual, but target English speaking readers, for whom you will have to explain your word choices in Hungarian
3. INTERMEDIAL component: convert your verbal translation of the poem « Jabberwocky » into another medium: play with the transition from text to image, to music, to video, etc.
4. PEDAGOGICAL component: create an exercise for students (explain which level you are targeting: elementary/high school or university, which skills you wish to develop, where/how you wish to integrate the exercise within the classroom activities) dealing with the poem « Jabberwocky »

SOME EXAMPLES for assignments submitted by my students in Spring 2023 :  
INTERMEDIAL component



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