

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

Jabberwocky Study Guide

CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE'S shows are aimed at educating as well as entertaining our audiences. School performances include a demonstration of the puppets and techniques we use. This study guide provides background information about the show and suggestions for classroom activities.

Jabberwocky

by Lewis Carroll

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

About *Jabberwocky*

Jabberwocky is found at the end of the first chapter of Lewis Carroll's **Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There**, the sequel to **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**. After Alice has entered the looking-glass (mirror) room and encountered the live chess pieces, she opens the book in which *Jabberwocky* is written. The poem is written backwards, and she is unable to read it until she realizes that it's a looking-glass book, and that she must hold it up to the mirror to decipher it.

Jabberwocky is considered by many to be the greatest of all nonsense poems in the English language. It has been imitated and parodied by countless writers and artists, and many of its invented words (burble, chortle and galumph, among others) have become part of the English language. Like the poets Ogden Nash and Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll delighted in invented language and in words that have no set meaning, but evoke images and feelings. As Alice says after reading the poem, "somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know what they are!"

Jabberwocky has its roots early in Lewis Carroll's life. The opening stanza appeared in a family magazine that he wrote and illustrated for his brothers and sisters. He was twenty-three at the time.

What do the words mean?

The important aspect of nonsense poetry is that **the reader determines the meaning, and therefore the meaning of the words can be different for each person.** Carroll himself gives his readers several definitions: in Chapter Six, Humpty-Dumpty explains some of the words to Alice, but, characteristically, these definitions are different from others that Carroll had given in letters or in his family magazine. Although the meaning of the words themselves is changeable, "Jabberwocky" contains a clear plot. It is a classic adventure story of a boy on a quest to find the dreaded Jabberwock.

In our production of the poem, we have chosen to disregard Lewis Carroll's varying definitions of the words, and have developed our own conceptions of the creatures in the poem, while following the sequence of action Carroll described.

About Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll was the pen-name for Charles Dodgson, who lived from 1832 to 1898. He was one of eleven children. He became a mathematics professor at Oxford University in England. Adults found him difficult to deal with, and he got along best with children. He was fond of magic and sleight of hand, and as a child he dabbled in puppetry. ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*** and its sequel, ***Through the Looking-Glass***, began as a story that Dodgson told his child friend, Alice Liddell, and her sisters. She begged him to write it down, and then he had it published.

The Puppets

All of the puppets in this production are rod puppets. Rod puppets are moved with sticks, called rods. The creatures that appear in the poem and in our show, and their methods of manipulation, are as follows:

Slithy toves: lizard-like, striped bodies, and a Cheshire-cat smile. These puppets have a control rod on the body, a string that controls the head movement, and springs that connect the head, tail and limbs to the body, allowing for the wiggling movement. "Slithy" sounded like "slimy" and "lithe," which is why we went with the lizardish look and movement.

Borogroves: The borogroves are the bowling-pin-shaped, gopher-like animals whose nest the boy discovers and chooses for his home. They are manipulated by rods to the back and the head.

Mome Rath: "and the mome raths outgrabe." This is the polka-dotted, grasshopper-like being that jumps great distances. The word "outgrabe" sounded to us like a definite action, which we decided would be jumping. This puppet has a control rod into the upper back, free-swinging legs, and a string pull that turns the head.

JubJub Bird: The JubJub bird and its baby have bodies based on slinkies, which allows them to bounce up and down. They both have control rods to the head. The mother bird has a moving mouth that is controlled by a string pull, as are the opening-and-closing eyes.

Frumious Bandersnatch: This is the egg-shaped being that grabs things, ingests them, and spits them out. "Frumious" sounded like "furious" to us, so we decided that this creature would have a less-than-happy attitude. "Bandersnatch" suggested both a rubber band and grabbing, so we incorporated these elements into the puppet design. These puppets are controlled by rods that allow them to roll, grab with the arm, and perform several other actions.

Jabberwock: The title character and something to be feared . . . we chose a two-headed monster, a cross between a serpent and a dragon. Two heads are better than one! This puppet has rods to the heads that control both head and body movement.

The Boy (Our Hero): The boy is a classic table-top rod puppet, with a rod in his back and a finger control for the head movement. His legs are built so that he can walk by rocking his body side-to-side, and his hands have small rods on them.

Classroom activities for before the performance:

Discussion: How is live performance different from television, or from a sporting event? How should you act in an audience? If you were giving a performance, how would you want the audience to behave? See our section on Audience Behavior below.

Discussion: Read the poem to the students and discuss what the creatures might look like.

Reading: Have each child choose a poem and read it aloud to the class.

Art: Draw pictures of what you think the creatures in Jabberwocky might look like.

Classroom activities for after the performance:

Writing/Creative thinking: Our production of "Jabberwocky" is just one interpretation of the poem. Working in small groups, create a different interpretation of the poem and characters for "Jabberwocky".

Language Arts: In the poem, Lewis Carroll sometimes combines two words to make a new word: "bubble" and "gurgle" turn into "burble", for example. Have the students combine two words to make a new one and then define it.

Language Arts: Read some other nonsense poems to the class, such as Edward Lear's "The Scroobious Pip," and "The Owl and the Pussycat." How are they similar to Jabberwocky? How are they different?

Writing: Have the students take an ordinary event (a trip home from school, for example) and write it as Lewis Carroll might have

written it, using invented words and fabulous action.

Art: Make a comic strip mural of the show, with each student drawing one thing that happened, and put them up on the wall.

Art/Language Arts: Alice discovered the poem written backwards. Have the students try this. Does it help to use the mirror?

Computer skills: Visit us on the web at www.crabgrasspuppets.com

Computer skills: search the internet for alternate versions of Jabberwocky. We found dozens!

Writing: Write letters to the puppeteers about the show. What did you enjoy most? (Feedback from teachers is also welcome!) Send letters to:

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre
c/o Encore Performing Arts, Inc.
P.O. Box 630
Melville, NY 11747

ABOUT CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE

Jamie Keithline and Bonny Hall are the **Crabgrass Puppet Theatre**. They have been working together since 1982, creating puppet shows and performing them around the country. Jamie and Bonny lived in San Francisco and performed in California when they first started their company. In 1989, they moved to Connecticut, and in 2001, to Vermont. Jamie and Bonny not only perform all of their shows, but they design and build all of the puppets and sets, write the scripts, and record the soundtracks.

In 2001, Crabgrass Puppet Theatre was awarded a **Citation for Excellence in the Art of Puppetry** from the American Center of the Union Internationale de la Marionette, the highest honor in American puppetry, for their production of *Anansi, Spiderman of Africa*. In 2004 they were again honored, this time for *The Bremen Town Musicians*.

AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR:

Many children do not have much experience with live performance, and do not understand how live performance is different from a sports event, a movie, or television. It can be helpful to discuss audience behavior with them prior to the performance. In addition to the basics (pay attention, don't talk, don't yell out), the following is important:

Applauding

This is the main way the audience shows its appreciation to the performers. Teachers can explain this prior to the performance, and can lead the way by applauding at the end of stories and at the end of the show.

Laughing

Laughing is another way of showing appreciation! We are *trying* to make the audience laugh, and sometimes we will visit a school where the teachers quiet the students when they laugh. We *want* them to laugh! Young children may need to be reminded that after they laugh, they need to quiet down again to listen to what comes next.

Is it okay for teachers to laugh?

YES! We are performing for teachers and parents as well as students, and there is plenty of humor in our shows for adults. Many teachers seem uncomfortable laughing in a school performance, but teachers' laughter does several important things. It shows the children that the teachers are paying attention to and enjoying the performance, which elevates the children's interest. It also raises the children's understanding of more sophisticated humor: when teachers laugh at something the children didn't find funny at first, the children often realize that it *was* funny, and we get a second wave of laughter.

The most enjoyable performances we give are the ones in which both teachers and students are engaged and responding.

Teachers: please be courteous to the performers!

We are well aware of how overworked and short of time most teachers are these days. But if teachers are correcting papers or carrying on conversations during a performance, they are unable to become involved in the performance, discuss it with their students afterwards, or set an example for the children by responding and applauding at the correct times. We are visiting more and more schools in which the teachers talk to each other during our shows; this sets a terrible example for the students, and makes it very difficult for us as performers. Teachers would definitely not appreciate it if we came into their classrooms while they were teaching and talked throughout the lesson . . .

For More Information:

To learn more about Crabgrass Puppet Theatre and our shows, please visit us on the web at www.crabgrasspuppets.com.

To bring Crabgrass Puppet Theatre to your school, please contact:

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