***Through the Looking Glass***

***Chapter 6***

***Humpty Dumpty***

***Summary:***

* The egg gets larger and larger, and when Alice gets close to it she realizes that it's Humpty Dumpty. She can't help saying aloud how much he looks like an egg.
* Humpty Dumpty tells her that it's irritating to him to be called an egg. Alice tries to explain that she only said he looked like one, and some eggs are very pretty, anyway. Humpty Dumpty is still offended and won't look at her.
* Verse Alert: Alice repeats the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" quietly to herself.
* Humpty Dumpty tells Alice to stop chattering to herself and tell him her name and business. When she says her name is Alice, he asks what it means. He says that his name indicates his shape, but hers doesn't.
* Alice tries to warn Humpty Dumpty about the dangers of sitting perched high on a wall. Humpty Dumpty explains that there's no possible chance he could fall off, but if he did, the King has promised to send all his horses and his men.
* Alice interjects the part about the horses and the men, which she remembers from the rhyme. Humpty Dumpty thinks she has been spying on him and gets angry, but she explains that she read it in a book.
* They lose track of the conversation and decide to start over. Humpty Dumpty asks Alice her age, and she says she's seven and a half. Humpty Dumpty tells her she should have stopped at seven, and she is offended by this remark.
* Alice changes the subject by complimenting Humpty Dumpty on his cravat (a kind of necktie) – but she can't decide whether it's really a cravat or a belt. He's offended and explains that it's a cravat, a gift from the White King and Queen for his un-birthday.
* Alice says she thinks un-birthday presents aren't as nice as birthday presents. Humpty Dumpty says they're better, because you only get one birthday a year, but you get 364 un-birthdays.
* Humpty Dumpty begins using fancy words, and each time he does, he gives Alice a long explanation of what he's using the word to mean. Alice isn't sure you can make words mean so many different things, but Humpty Dumpty says you can. He explains that he pays them extra when he makes them work really hard.
* Since Humpty Dumpty seems to be good with words, Alice asks him to explain the poem "[**Jabberwocky**](https://www.shmoop.com/jabberwocky/)," which she read in Looking-Glass House in Chapter 1. Line by line, Humpty Dumpty explains what the poem means, giving Alice definitions for the words she didn't know.
* Verse Alert: Humpty Dumpty offers to recite a poem to Alice. Alice tries to stop him, but he's determined. He recites a nonsense poem in couplets about fishes.
* At the end of the poem, Humpty Dumpty abruptly says goodbye to Alice. She wishes him goodbye until they meet again, but he says he won't recognize her the next time because she looks just like everybody else.
* Humpty Dumpty shuts his eyes, and Alice walks away. She says to herself that he is a very unsatisfactory person.
* Suddenly there is a loud crash, and the whole forest shakes.

***Synopsis:***

Alice approaches the egg, which has grown large and transformed into Humpty Dumpty. Humpty Dumpty idly sits on a wall, taking no notice of Alice until she remarks how much he resembles an egg. Irritated by this remark, Humpty Dumpty insults Alice. She starts to softly recite the nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty, and he asks for her name and requests that she state her business. Alice tells Humpty Dumpty her name and he tells her that her name is stupid. In Humpty Dumpty’s opinion, names should mean something, offering his own name as an example since it alludes to the shape of his body. He goes on to remark that with a name like Alice, she could be any shape at all. Concerned for his safety, Alice asks Humpty Dumpty why he sits atop the wall. He replies that the King made him a promise, which spurs Alice’s memory of the rhyme stating that the King’s horses and the King’s men put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Alice’s allusion to the poem angers Humpty Dumpty, who insists that he is well protected and changes the subject.

Humpty Dumpty seems to make a riddle out of every part of their conversation. Alice compliments his cravat, which he explains he received from the White King and Queen for his un-birthday. He explains that an un-birthday is a day that is not his birthday. Humpty Dumpty declares that un-birthdays are better than birthdays and starts to use words that make no sense in the context of what he says. Alice questions what he means, to which he retorts that he can make words do anything that he wants, though he pays words extra if he requires them to do a lot of work. Alice remembers the poem “Jabberwocky,” and she asks Humpty Dumpty to explain the words to her. She recites the first stanza, which he picks apart word by word. Humpty Dumpty then begins his own poem for her, which abruptly ends with a goodbye. Annoyed, Alice walks off, complaining about his behavior when a great crash resounds through the wood.***Brief Analysis:***

Humpty Dumpty reintroduces the idea of naming and the role it plays in shaping identity. Unlike the Fawn and the Gnat, Humpty Dumpty has a nuanced understanding of naming. However, Humpty Dumpty maintains an understanding of language that reverses Alice’s understanding of the way language works. Alice believes that proper names do not have profound significance, while names for universal concepts such as a “glory” or “impenetrability” have fixed meanings that all people understand. Humpty Dumpty believes the opposite, stating that he finds the name Alice to be stupid since it fails to connote anything about who she is. Humpty Dumpty continues this manipulation of language, taking liberties with the meanings of known words and establishing definitions for them that suit his purposes. Words become characters under Humpty Dumpty’s employment, an idea he promotes with the claim that he literally pays the words more when he makes them do a lot of work.

Humpty Dumpty’s philosophy of naming demonstrates both the arbitrariness of lanugage and the capacity of literature to convey meaning. Humpty Dumpty redefines the meanings of words at will, but he must use other words that have presumably stable meanings to explain the new definitions. If too many words have fluid meanings, their meanings will change erratically, and language will cease to function as a system capable of communicating ideas. Humpty Dumpty’s ideas about language will fall apart if multiple people adjust the meanings of words to suit their individual fancy. When applied to literature, Humpty Dumpty’s ideas are more appropriate. Authors manipulate the multiple meanings of words they use when writing, giving their language a richness that has the potential to fascinate and delight readers. Carroll’s frequent use of puns and wordplay shows how attuned he was to this property of language. Even in this section, Carroll plays with the pun on the “richness” of language, indicating that Humpty Dumpty pays words more when they work harder.***Critical Study:***

The egg [Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Alice) buys grows larger and becomes Humpty Dumpty. Alice and Humpty Dumpty talk briefly. He is as unpleasant as the flowers, the guard, and the twins. Not bothering to make eye contact, he comments, "Some people have no more sense than a baby!" In general, he is quarrelsome, alternating between insulting remarks and arguments about the meaning of words—and he is thoroughly impressed with his own knowledge and cleverness.

He is most helpful in responding to Alice's questions about the definition of words from the "Jabberwocky" poem. He explains, "Well, 'slithy' means 'lithe and slimy.'" However, as he continues, his answers are increasingly nonsensical: "Well, 'toves' are something like badgers—they're something like lizards—and they're something like corkscrews."

His arrogance, however, may cast doubts on the accuracy of his explanations. He claims, "I can explain all the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that haven't been invented just yet." Since such a claim isn't realistic, the validity of everything he has said may be suspect.

Then, Humpty Dumpty recites a poem, despite Alice's assurances he need not. Suddenly, he stops reciting without ending the poem. "Good-bye," he announces, bringing their conversation to an abrupt end. The chapter ends with a heavy crashing sound that shakes the whole forest.

Contextually speaking, Humpty Dumpty is one of the most arrogant and least useful characters [Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Alice) encounters. He asserts numerous things that are illogical, and his only reference for authority is himself. The terms he defines are those in a nonsense poem, and as he continues, his explanations seem increasingly inaccurate. In many ways, he resembles adults Alice is likely to encounter in the waking world. He is pompous, and even though she politely points out when he is wrong, he dismisses her opinions out of hand. His manner is both unpleasant and disdainful.

However, a function Humpty Dumpty does serve is to allow [Carroll](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/author/) to offer insight into the poem, "Jabberwocky." Humpty Dumpty offers readers some pronunciation and word association clues.

At this point, readers may recall that Carroll's preface focuses both on the "Jabberwocky" verse and on the narrative's chess match connections. The preface was added more than 20 years after publication, so initial readers of *Through the Looking-Glass* had no overt explanation of these details other than through the [Red Queen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Red_Queen)'s statements about Alice's route in [Chapter 2](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/chapter-2-summary/) and Humpty Dumpty's comments here. Carroll clearly considered both of these things to be important, as they are outlined in two chapters and account for half of the preface.

***Critical Analysis:***

The egg continues to get bigger and bigger, and it also has acquired human features, and it is sitting atop a rather narrow wall. [Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice) realizes that this must be [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list" \l "humpty-dumpty). He is offended by her remark that he looks like an egg. Because she is dissatisfied with the conversation, she recites the Humpty Dumpty poem to herself.

Humpty Dumpty asks her not to mutter to herself, and she expresses concern about him being seated so precariously on the wall. He argues that there is nothing to worry about, and before he can explain why, Alice says that it is because the kings men will all come to put him back in his place. He asks her how she knows this, and she says she read it in a book.

Humpty Dumpty then asks her what her name means, and she says that names do not have to have meanings. He argues that her name is stupid because it could mean anything. Alice tries to change the subject by complimenting him on his belt, but he is quite insulted because it is a cravat. He remarks that it was a gift from White King and Queen.

Alice asks Humpty Dumpty to translate Jabberwocky for her, since she observes that he has a way with words. He provides ridiculous definitions for all of the words she does not understand, and when he is done, he offers to recite a poem for her. She does not really want to listen to a poem, but when she hears that he composed it just for her, she figures she should just listen.

He cuts it off rather abruptly and indicates that he thinks they should say goodbye. He remarks that because her face is so ordinary he probably would not realize it if they were to ever meet again. Before she can respond, a great crash shakes the forest.

This chapter includes another argument about names that relates to Carroll's interest in formal logic. Humpty Dumpty argues that his name and Alice's and proper names in general should have universal significance, whereas improper names of things can mean whatever he wants them to mean. Obviously, in the real world, this situation is reversed.

This episode in many ways relates back to the original nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty. Although it does not proceed in the same way, there are important references to note. For example, Carroll employs the word "proud" rather frequently in this chapter, which is meant to recall Humpty Dumpty's "pride that goeth before his fall."

Carroll is obviously capable of morbid humor, as evidenced by the part of the conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in which they discuss age. Alice remarks that it is impossible for one to stop growing older. This is Humpty Dumpty's reply: "*One* can't, perhaps, but *two* can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven."

Humpty Dumpty is likely a satire of a certain type of intellectual. He has clear strengths and weaknesses. He of course claims that he is good at everything, but it seems that his most likely specialization is linguistics. The humor is evident because even though Humpty Dumpty can talk extensively about words and language, he is utterly helpless when it comes to mathematics, which was Carroll's own field of expertise.

The story of Humpty Dumpty is also an allegory for the fall of man from grace as well as the fall of the devil for his pride. This also relates to the issue of childhood and the "fall of innocence" that accompanies the progression to adulthood. Perhaps Humpty Dumpty is meant to be a lesson for Alice, though it seems she is already many steps ahead of him when it comes to maturity.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

As [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) approaches the egg, it gets bigger until she realizes that it's actually [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) sitting high on a wall. When she gets close, Alice remarks out loud that he looks like an egg. He doesn't answer, so she thinks he's a doll until he says that he's offended to be called an egg. Alice tries to turn her statement into a compliment by insisting that she said that he looked like an egg and that he's pretty. Humpty Dumpty says that some people have no sense. It seems as though he tells this to a tree, so Alice softly recites the poem "Humpty Dumpty" to herself and declares that the last line is too long. Humpty Dumpty snaps at her to stop talking to herself and to state her name and her business instead.

***Analysis Part 1:***

When Alice recites "Humpty Dumpty," just as she remembered the song about Tweedledum and Tweedledee, it suggests that this recitation is going to have a similar effect—the nursery rhyme will come true and Humpty Dumpty will fall off the wall. This again suggests that Alice has more control over this experience than she might think, even as Humpty Dumpty insists that Alice is silly and doesn't know how to properly interact. His behavior suggests that he's using his adult status to lord over Alice and make her feel inferior and less powerful.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) offers her name but before she can say anything else, [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) says her name is stupid and asks what it means. Alice asks if it has to mean anything, and Humpty Dumpty responds that it does. His name refers to his shape, while "Alice" doesn't tell him anything about Alice's shape. Not wanting to argue, Alice asks why he's sitting alone. Humpty Dumpty takes this as a riddle and says that there's nobody with him. He asks her for a better riddle. She asks if he thinks it'd be safer to be on the ground. This annoys him because it's easy, and he starts to say that the king promised him something. Alice finishes his sentence that the king will send horses and men but Humpty Dumpty accuses her of eavesdropping.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Alice's confusion when Humpty Dumpty asks for riddles suggests that it's possible that Alice doesn't know the origins of the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme: it was originally a riddle, and the answer was an egg. Again, Alice's lack of knowledge means that she's left scrambling to figure out how to act. Humpty Dumpty's insistence that Alice's name isn't descriptive enough shows that he has definite ideas of how names work and what they must do—even though "Humpty Dumpty" doesn't actually mean egg-shaped; it's nonsense.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) says that she read it in a book and [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) responds that a book is a "History of England." Humpty Dumpty offers to shake hands with Alice to prove that he's not proud. His smile gets bigger, making Alice wonder what would happen if the edges of his mouth met in the back. Humpty Dumpty insists that they go back two conversation subjects but, when Alice can't remember it, he asks her how old she said she was. Alice says that she's seven years and six months, which Humpty Dumpty says is wrong—she never said that. Alice explains that she thought he was asking how old she is, but he snaps that if he meant that, he would've said that. Humpty Dumpty says that Alice should've stopped growing at seven. Alice indignantly says that "one can't help growing older," but Humpty Dumpty says that two can.

***Analysis Part 3:***

This conversation about semantics means that Alice has to think more literally about language—she needs to not take language to what she suspects it means and instead must think about what exactly Humpty Dumpty is asking. Through this, Lewis Carroll shows the reader what language can do and demonstrates the different ways that it can function. Humpty Dumpty's displeasure with the fact that Alice is getting older falls in line with the rest of the characters' displeasure: it suggests that Alice is already past a childhood prime and is becoming less free and interesting as she ages.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) decides that it's her turn to choose a subject, so she compliments [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)'s belt. She deliberates out loud as to whether it's actually a belt or a cravat and realizes that she seriously offended Humpty Dumpty. He snarls that he's offended, but after Alice apologizes, he explains that it was an un-birthday present from the [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) and the [White King](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king). Puzzled, Alice asks what an un-birthday present is. When Humpty Dumpty explains that it's a present given to someone when it's not their birthday, Alice declares that she likes birthday presents best. To prove that Alice is wrong, Humpty Dumpty makes Alice do the math and makes the point that in a year, there are 364 possible days for un-birthday presents, but only one for birthday presents. He says that this is "glory."

***Analysis part 4:***

Alice's mistake about the cravat is very understandable—but Humpty Dumpty's offense shows that even when a mistake is understandable, that doesn't mean that it's not benign. With this, the novel suggests that Alice will have to pay closer attention and do whatever she can to stay on top of whatever etiquette rules she comes across in the moment. It's not enough, Humpty Dumpty suggests, to do her best and try to be nice. Instead, Alice needs to somehow know how to properly behave in order to be in the clear—something that's impossible to do, setting Alice up to fail even more.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) asks what [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) means by "glory." He says that he means it's a good argument and, when Alice points out that "glory" doesn't refer to a good argument, Humpty Dumpty says scornfully that words mean what he wants them to mean. Alice asks if he can do this, but Humpty Dumpty's answer makes no sense. After a moment of silence, Humpty Dumpty says that verbs are proud and have tempers, but he can make them do anything. He declares, "Impenetrability!" and explains that it means that he's done with the subject and wants to know where Alice is going. Alice remarks that this is a lot of meaning for one word, and Humpty Dumpty says he pays words extra when he makes them work so hard.Sense, Nonsense, and Language Theme Icon

***Analysis Part 5:***

Humpty Dumpty has a far more playful and interesting view of what language can do than Alice does in this instance: as long as he pays his words fairly, he suggests, he can make them do and mean anything. This is, of course, not actually true if Humpty Dumpty wants anyone to understand him without having to constantly explain himself, but it shows again that words and wordplay can be fun and entertaining.

***Summary Part 6:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) asks [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) if he could decode "[Jabberwocky](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/the-poem-jabberwocky)" for her. She recites the first verse and he begins to work through it and explain that brillig refers to 4:00 p.m., while toves are a cross between a badger, a lizard, and a corkscrew. He introduces her to portmanteau words like slithy (lithe and slimy) and mimsy (flimsy and miserable). When they get through the first verse, Alice explains that she read the poem in a book and mentions that [Tweedledee](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledee) recited an easier poem to her earlier. Humpty Dumpty insists that he's also good at reciting poetry and is going to recite one that was written just for Alice. Feeling that she has no choice but to listen, Alice sits down sadly.

***Analysis Part 6:***

Keep in mind that all the words that Humpty Dumpty is decoding for Alice are words that Lewis Carroll made up—they're all nonsense. This means that while Humpty Dumpty's interpretation is necessary if a person wants to interpret the poem, it's also possible that Humpty Dumpty is making up even more nonsense, as there's no way to confirm that these words mean what Humpty Dumpty says they do. Again, however, this doesn't take away from how delightful the poem is on an auditory level.

***Summary Part 7:***

[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) intones that he's telling [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) his poem in winter; in summer, she might understand; and in the fall, she should write it down. Alice interrupts through this until Humpty Dumpty scolds her. The poem proceeds and the narrator and some fish exchange messages. The fish refuse to do what the narrator wants them to, so the narrator gets a kettle and fills it. The narrator shouts for a messenger to wake up the sleeping fish, but ends up going to their door. The narrator finds the door locked, so they push and kick and try to turn the handle. Humpty Dumpty pauses here and Alice asks if that's the entire poem. He says it is and dismisses her.

***Analysis part 7:***

Alice's sense that she has to sit and listen to the poem shows again that, in order to be polite, Alice cannot do what she wants to do and instead, must make those around her happy and comfortable at her own expense. When the poem makes no sense and especially when it ends so abruptly, the novel makes the case again that literature and poetry don't have to make sense to be fun—but there are still things that make nonsense more comfortable or accessible, such as a clear ending, which this poem doesn't have.

***Summary part 8:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) cheerfully bids [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty) goodbye and extends her hand. He disdainfully offers her a single finger to shake and says that she's just like other people with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, all in the same place. Alice insists that switching around her facial features wouldn't look nice, but Humpty Dumpty shuts his eyes and ignores her. She begins to walk away, talking to herself about how unsatisfactory her meeting with Humpty Dumpty was. She hears a heavy crash that shakes the forest.

***Analysis Part 8:***

Saying that Alice is just like everyone else again suggests that Alice is growing up and becoming boring—possibly, if Alice were younger, she'd be more willing to entertain the possibility of rearranging facial features and having that be something interesting and worth considering. At seven and a half, Alice is now at the point where she knows how the world works and isn't willing to change it too much.