

Jabberwocky



POEM TEXT

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

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

9 He took his vorpal sword in hand;
 10 Long time the manxome foe he sought—
 11 So rested he by the Tumtum tree
 12 And stood awhile in thought.

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

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

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

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

claws could catch you! Watch out for the Jubjub bird, and avoid the fuming, furious Bandersnatch!"

Holding his vorpal sword, the son searched a long while for the fearsome beast. Then, he took a break next to a Tumtum tree and contemplated his situation.

While he was still thinking, the Jabberwock emerged from the dark woods with flaming eyes, making a bleating and warbling sound.

After a noisy clash, the son decapitated the Jabberwock with his sword. He hurried home triumphantly with the Jabberwock's head.

"And have you killed the Jabberwock? Give me a hug, my smiling son! What a fabulous and joyful day! Woo hoo! Hooray!" He chuckled and snorted in happiness.

It was around four o'clock in the afternoon, and the slimy toves bore holes in the side of the wet hill by spinning around. The borogoves were miserable, and the lost raths whistled and bellowed.



THEMES



GOOD VS. EVIL

Amidst the whimsical language of "Jabberwocky" lies a seemingly simple tale of good versus evil: a son embarks on a quest to kill a fearsome beast, the Jabberwock, before returning victorious to his father. Yet while upon first glance the poem suggests the inevitable triumph of good over evil, the repetition of the final stanza implies this might not be the case. On the contrary, this repetition suggests that the hero's victory has had little impact on the rest of this world. If that's true, then perhaps the poem argues that the fight against evil is never complete, because danger is always lurking.

The hero's father warns him early on to "beware" three mysterious beasts: the "Jabberwock," the "Jubjub bird," and the "Bandersnatch." The repetition of "beware" in lines 5 and 7 invites anticipation of these strange threats and signals that they are worth fearing despite their silly names. On a sonic level, the short, hard consonant sounds in words like "claws," "catch," "shun," and "snatch" (in *Bandersnatch*) are rough and unpleasant to the ear, perhaps not unlike the things they describe. Yet even after reading the poem's accompanying text, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, readers don't have a clear idea of what these beasts look like, nor why the hero is instructed to "beware" them. Their dangerous potential is uncertain, and this makes them all the more frightening. In this sense, Carroll is connecting evil to a fear of



SUMMARY

It was around four o'clock in the afternoon, and the slimy toves bore holes in the side of the wet hill by spinning around. The borogoves were miserable, and the lost raths whistled and bellowed.

"Watch out for the Jabberwock, my son! Its jaws bite, and its

the unknown—which is perhaps harder to defeat than a physical monster.

Carroll does later offer a bit more clarity as to what the hero is up against. Just before the loud and hostile Jabberwock emerges from the woods, the hero rests contemplatively by a tree. In line 14, the Jabberwock interrupts the hero's peace with "eyes aflame" and "bubbling" sounds. These contrasting images, one peaceful and the other violent, help to separate good from evil on a visual level. On an auditory level, readers can contrast the Jabberwock's sounds with the father's jolly "Callooh! Callay!" (which are joyous—even humorous—rather than menacing).

Yet, despite Carroll describing the Jabberwock as having "eyes," "jaws," "claws," and a "head," readers still don't actually know what it looks like. Instead, Carroll relies only on these simple bodily fragments to present his monster, leaving readers with the task of filling in the gaps. The fact that the Jabberwock remains visually mysterious allows readers' imaginations to run wild, perhaps coming up with something far more terrifying than anything Carroll could ever specifically describe. Once again, the threat or anticipation of an unknown evil is perhaps the most frightening thing about it.

Finally, the fact that the poem begins and ends with the same stanza may be a visual suggestion that the hero has returned home after defeating the enemy and that all is well. Yet, even if we take the time to decipher the words in this stanza (with the help of *Through the Looking Glass*), it's still an unsettling and even foreboding finale. In it, slimy, badger-like creatures called "toves" bore holes in the side of a hill while borogoves and raths (other strange Carrollian creatures) make bellowing sounds. We can only guess as to the significance of this scene, and its presence instills a sense of mystery, or of lying in wait, from the poem's onset. If the poem began in mystery, why might the repeated stanza at the end not cause the same effect?

Thus while this specific quest may be resolved with the Jabberwock's death, we are left to wonder if another threat, perhaps the "frumious Bandersnatch," could be waiting. Even at the point of conflict resolution, we are left uncertain about the presence of evil. Is the story *really* over? Or is there something else we should "beware?"

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 14-16
- Line 23
- Lines 25-28



NONSENSE AND STORYTELLING

In "Jabberwocky," Carroll combines a familiar form and narrative with very unfamiliar language. Most of his invented words have meanings, as readers can learn from *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, but their initial effect within the poem is one of confusion and nonsense. In most cases, readers can't fully make sense of a poem if they do not know all the words. But by organizing his language in the form of a [ballad](#) as well as by framing his tale as a traditional heroic quest, Carroll suggests that it's very possible to imbue nonsensical language with meaning simply through context. Nonsensical language can also make familiar stories seem humorously strange and allows Carroll to gently poke fun at (or, more generously, breathe life into) clichéd adventure stories: so familiar are these tales that they make sense even with made-up words slotted into them like a Mad Lib.

The rhyme scheme and meter of the poem resemble those of a ballad, which is a verse form that tells a story using four-line stanzas (a.k.a. [quatrain](#)s). With this organization, Carroll's words invite readers' curiosity: there's something reassuring about a poem that rhymes along a specific meter even if the words of the poem itself are nonsensical, for they at least make sense on a basic auditory level. In other words, the poem *sounds* like a certain kind of story. This form allows words like "toves," "wabe," "borogoves," and "outgrabe" to resonate with whimsy. If they didn't rhyme or obey a specific structure, readers would likely be less tolerant of their oddity. Instead, it's easy enough to imagine the gist of the scene despite about half of the words not being actual words.

The poem's questing narrative is also common enough for readers to recognize it beneath all the nonsense. We know that a hero sets out to kill a monster (the Jabberwock), even if we don't fully understand the monster's identity or the general setting. The heroic quest is a tried and true plot, which allows readers to fill in what they don't understand with their imaginations.

For example, in the fifth stanza, the hero's "vorpal" blade goes "snicker-snack," after which the Jabberwock dies and the hero goes "galumphing back." We know that these words describe a fight scene between the hero and the Jabberwock even without knowing the words "vorpal," "snicker-snack," or "galumphing." We can make educated guesses about their meanings because of the common narrative of heroes battling monsters. They also sound similar to those meanings (e.g. "galumphing" sounds like "galloping" and "triumphant" at the same time, suggesting the hero's happy, quick return).

The namesake of the poem, the Jabberwock, is perhaps the most striking blend of nonsense and familiarity. Although it has "eyes aflame" and makes a "bubbling" noise, its image is undefined. For all we know, it might have wings, horns, or an otherwise odd arrangement of body parts. Yet neither its

strange name nor its lack of a full description deter readers from understanding that it is a beast worth fearing. Monsters are historically menacing because they are often not fully described (e.g. a mysterious monster hiding under the bed). In this sense, the Jabberwocky's lack of description actually is familiar because it could look like anything.

In this way, Carroll relies on our imaginations (and our familiarity with monsters) to render an image of the Jabberwock. No two readers' conceptions of the Jabberwock will likely be the same, but that is part of the magic of Carroll's trust in his readers' ability to weave meaning from nonsense.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 25-28



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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

The poem begins with nonsense words. Nearly every noun, adjective, and verb is an invention of Carroll's ("gyre" being the exception), so our initial engagement with the poem happens through its appealing *sound* rather than its more specific meaning.

Yet even in these initial lines, that sound evokes the sense of an adventurous epic through strong, full rhymes and regular [iambic](#) meter. Indeed, this stanza establishes the rhyme scheme that the rest of the poem will follow (for the most part)—an ABAB pattern—as well as the poem's iambic tetrameter. Despite not knowing what the words actually mean, they fall easily into the familiar da-DUM rhythm of an iambic poem:

'Twas **brillig**, and the **slithy toves**

This exact rhyme scheme and meter mimic the style of a lyrical [ballad](#), a poetic form that most often tells a story of love or adventure (in this case, the latter). Carroll thus makes it clear to the reader that this is the beginning of some epic story—quite a feat, considering that so few of these words are foreign to us.

The rest of the stanza is filled with more sonic lushness that makes the words' specific meaning rather, well, meaningless. The word "brillig" shares [assonance](#) with the /i/ sounds of "mimsy," while the words "gyre," "gimble," "borogoves" and "outgrabe" each have [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) with /g/ and

/b/ sounds. "Borogoves" and "mome" are yet another pair of assonance. All these repeated sounds make the poem seem carefully crafted; it comes across as highly literary and poetic, befitting of its ballad form. Of course, given that the poem is also nonsensical, this could be thought of as a good-natured satire of that form: all pomp, no circumstance.

Indeed, since it is difficult to tell what's actually happening in this stanza without the contextual aid of *Through the Looking Glass*, the poem begins in almost utter mystery. We have trouble knowing what to expect (in fact, we might say the nonsensical quality of the poem defies expectation), but the familiar form of the ballad and the whimsical, creative sounds keep us engaged and curious.

LINES 5-8

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

The second stanza provides more concrete details about the plot while continuing the first stanza's flair for the nonsensical and the sonically lush. Here, a father tells his son to "beware" the "Jabberwock," the "Jubjub bird," and the "Bandersnatch."

These beasts may be Carrollian inventions, but they are described in familiarly frightening ways. The Jabberwock has "jaws" and "claws," both of which are commonly associated with dangerous animals. Carroll's verb choice is also threatening. The words "bite," "catch," and "snatch" (within the word *Bandersnatch*) are all rough, curt, and harsh sounds, perhaps not unlike the beasts themselves.

The stanza also contains a great deal of consonance. This is especially clear with the /b/ sounds, which link the monsters' names—"Jabberwock," "Jub Jub bird," and "Bandersnatch"—to the foreboding "beware" and "bite." Each beast's name also contains three syllables (Jabb-er-wock, Jub-jub bird, Ban-der-snatch), a numerically odd number that sets them apart from the shorter monosyllabic or bisyllabic words in the stanza, perhaps calling attention to their strangeness.

Plot-wise, we know that the father is letting the son go on a journey of sorts because he is giving caution rather than offering fatherly protection. This action sets us up to expect danger later on from at least one of the three beasts, and that a conflict between it and the son may occur. If the first stanza is essentially the "once upon a time..." opening of the story, the second stanza sees the hero gearing up to set off on his journey.

The fact that none of these beasts is specifically described (with the exception of the Jabberwock's "jaws" and "claws") continues the sense of mystery initiated by the first stanza. We suspect that a beast might appear, but we don't know what form it will take. This allows the reader's imagination to run wild, to fill in the blanks created by the poem's reliance on

nonsense.

LINES 9-12

*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.*

The stage now set, the hero finally grabs his sword and takes off on his adventure. Except, this moment of action is almost immediately followed by a long rest—a humorous [juxtaposition](#) that subtly undercuts the seriousness of the epic tale.

Indeed, in contrast to the first two stanzas, which are full of events and information (even if that information is nonsensical and mysterious), this third stanza contains relatively little. Its main purpose is to convey the passage of time. The hero spends a "long time" searching for the Jabberwock, rests by a tree, and then stands "awhile" in thought. These patient, persistent actions taken by the hero suggest that he is not only unafraid of the beast, but intent on killing it with his "vorpal sword." Overall, the moment can also be seen as one of inaction, or peace, which serves as a kind of calm before the storm.

This stanza also showcases the poem's first break in its so-far regular rhyme scheme. Until now, the poem has obeyed a strict ABAB pattern in its [quatrains](#). However, the word "tree" in line 11 doesn't rhyme with "hand" in line 9, even though "sought" rhymes with "thought" in the other two lines. The rhyme scheme is thus ABCB.

This lapse in the pattern could suggest several things. Perhaps something is out of order even though the events in the stanza are relatively peaceful; conflict may be near. Furthermore, the decision for "tree" to stick out as the un-rhyming word may also call attention to the hero's reliance (however brief) on some aspect of the natural world to shelter him. We may not know the properties of the "Tumtum tree," but it nevertheless provides a small measure of security to the hero, who uses it to rest.

Receiving some form of aid from the natural world is a common occurrence in traditional questing narratives, which further imbues this poem with a sense of importance and grandeur (even as, again, most of the words here make no sense).

LINES 13-16

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

In a sharp transition from the quiet events of the third stanza, the fourth stanza bursts with action. It even catches the hero by surprise, for he is still standing in "uffish thought" when the Jabberwock leaps from the woods.

The imagery of the Jabberwock creates a menacing figure. It

has "eyes of flame," referencing traditional demonic imagery, and creates a "whiffling" and "bubbling" sound. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll defines these verbs as strange warbling and bleating noises, respectively, but we can get the gist of what's happening even without that context. By communicating in loud, barbaric yawps, the image of the Jabberwock further distinguishes itself from the quiet, resting hero. Readers are swiftly met with a raging monster, its suddenness helping to increase the intensity of the scene and move us toward the climax of the poem's narrative.

Carroll presents the Jabberwock as a mysterious source of evil via his invented words. Not only does the stanza not have a clear description of the Jabberwock (beyond its fiery eyes), but the noises it makes are foreign to readers' ears. We can learn what "warbling" and "bleating" mean, but *Through the Looking Glass* makes clear that they are only related to those sounds rather than exact replicas. The Jabberwock is therefore something that readers have neither seen nor heard before, and in this way requires imagination to participate in the making of a clearer picture. The strange language might seem deterring on the surface, but it is actually inviting of our own mind's eye (and ear). There is even a sense of whimsy in the way Carroll strings /w/ sounds together ("Jabberwock," "whiffling," and "wood") with [alliteration](#), the repetitive sounds heightening the poetic intensity of this moment.

The meter remains in consistent [iambic](#) tetrameter while the rhyme scheme has returned to its regular ABAB pattern here, perhaps reflecting that the moment of rest in the previous stanza has thoroughly ended: we're in the midst of battle now.

LINES 17-20

*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.*

The fifth stanza contains the poem's [climax](#): the fight between the hero and the monstrous Jabberwock. Immediately, the story relies once again on sound to heighten its impact. "One, two! One, two!" (which also creates a moment of [caesura](#)) is a phrase that rings from the world of boxing and one-on-one sparring, and here it represents the first blows exchanged by the hero and the Jabberwock. Similarly, the phrase "snicker-snack," even though it is one of Carroll's made-up words, seems almost like an [onomatopoeia](#) in the way a sword makes quick slashes and cuts. The violence is short-lived, however, because the stanza ends with a decapitated Jabberwock and a hero confidently returning home.

In the space of only a few lines, the Jabberwock has transformed from a menacing, demonic creature into a decapitated trophy. The rhyme of "dead" with "head" in line 19 seems to underscore the swift sure-footedness of our hero, who so readily picks up the slain monster's head in the same

line that he killed it.

The word "galumphing" sounds like several words ("gallant," "gallop," and "triumphant" come to mind), and portray the hero as returning happily from what might have been no more than a woodland hunt. The brevity of the fight makes readers question whether or not the hero was ever really afraid of the Jabberwock and how difficult it was to fight it.

Readers are also left wondering about the purpose of the quest: why did the Jabberwock need to die? What danger did it present? These questions may be left unanswered, but the fact that we do not know the answers suggests that the poem cares more about the nonsensical presentation of a fantasy rather than a completely comprehensible conflict. It is yet another space that the poem leaves open to the imagination.

With its repetition, pauses, internal rhymes, and onomatopoeia, the sounds of the stanza are once again both playful and self-consciously literary. This is highly-constructed language that rolls off the tongue yet is decidedly not conversational. Lest we forget, the speaker seems to be saying—with tongue firmly in cheek—this is a story of epic proportions, like the heroic sagas of ages past.

LINES 21-24

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

This sixth stanza contains the plot's denouement, ending with the father's rupture of joy. Even though his exclamations are odd, they still *sound* happy. "Frabjous" sounds like the words "fabulous" or "joyous," while "Callooh!" and "Callay!" do not sound too far off from "Woo hoo!" or "Hooray!" They are celebratory phrases, but continue the poem's whimsical use of new language. The word "chortle," although originating with Carroll, has become so well-loved that it has moved into the realm of accepted English. It seems to contain both "chuckle" and "snort," which are commonly used to express laughter.

Again these lines are filled with distinctly poetic language, such as the [alliteration](#) of "beamish boy" and "Callooh! Callay!" (which also contains [consonance](#) with the /l/ sounds). The third line of stanza echoes the third line of the fifth stanza in its use of [internal rhyme](#) ("day" with "Callay"). The antiquated "hast though slain" elevates the language further still, again suggesting this tale is the stuff of epic poetry (though, again, the nonsensical nature of much of the words here suggest that this is done all with a bit of a wink and a smirk on the speaker and/or poet).

This stanza also makes clear another unusual feature of the poem, which is that the hero's father is the only figure to use speech. In fact, his dialogue bookends the main plot with warning (at the onset) and celebration (at the resolution), giving

him a narratorial air even though he does not actually narrate.

What remains unclear, however, is whether the father's joy stems more from the Jabberwock's death (as line 21 suggests), or from the fact that his son is still alive (as line 22 suggests). Both are likely true, but it is worth noting that the father is the figure to express joy rather than the hero, who was the one to actually kill the Jabberwock. It is unusual, even for a questing narrative, for the audience to sympathize more with a father's set of emotions than the hero's, who does not seem to express any emotion (much less speech) throughout the entire poem. This reality suggests that the quest was perhaps more important to the father than to the son, and that the son was no more than an arm through which the father's goal might be completed.

LINES 25-28

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

This stanza is an exact copy of the first, so it's worthwhile to focus on the significance of its repetition and placement at the poem's end. Using *Through the Looking Glass* as a guide for understanding the stanza's unusual words, it becomes evident that even when defined, the stanza remains mysterious.

A description of badger-like creatures boring holes in a wet hill with strange birds wailing in the background does not seem to have any relation to the rest of the poem beyond its being strange and nonsensical. When placed at the beginning of the poem, the stanza fosters a mysterious and foreboding tone, readying readers/listeners for the ridiculous creature they will encounter later on.

Yet when placed at the end, the stanza carries the same effect even though the narrative in the poem has concluded. Formally, it may signify that events have come full circle (and have thereby resolved), but also that there may yet be something dark to expect. Creatures are "mimsy" (miserable) and "outgrabing" (a mix of bellowing and whistling), just as they were at the beginning. Something is still not sitting well with them, or else they likely wouldn't be making the same sounds that they were at the beginning of the poem.

In other words, though the Jabberwock is dead, other dangers lie in wait.



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) pervades each stanza of this poem, imbuing it with a catchy auditory quality that engages readers in the sound of these nonsensical words. Without it, the poem's nonsense

words would likely seem rather threatening in their unfamiliarity rather than invitingly interesting. By employing so much alliteration, "Jabberwocky" becomes just as concerned with language itself, and its potential to create meaning through sound, as it does with a general plot.

One especially important example of alliteration occurs in the second stanza. The /b/ of "Beware" connects to the /b/ in "bite," "bird," and "Bandersnatch," all of which have evil connotations within the poem.

Similarly, "Jabberwock," "jaws," and "Jubjub" are connected through their initial /j/ sound, while "claws" and "catch" share a hard /c/ sound. These alliterative links signal that these beings are indeed worthy of beware, and intensifies their menacing qualities. Rather than offer us a specific description of a fearsome beast, the poem chooses to invoke fear via sound, letting the harsh, hard /c/ sound communicate meaning.

Other examples of alliteration (and [consonance](#), for that matter) include "Callooh" and "Callay," which the hero's father uses to convey his happiness at the death of the Jabberwock. This pairing, as well as ones like "gyre" and "gimble," show Carroll more at play rather than in the process of conveying a specific meaning. The poem's questing narrative is certainly serious, but we cannot help but imagine Carroll enjoying himself in creating these attractive word sounds. This playful tendency even pokes fun at the heroic questing tale, nudging "Jabberwocky" into the realm of [parody](#). In doing so, the linguistic playfulness and whimsy seem to matter more to this poem than the actual plot of the ballad, which is admittedly blurry thanks to the nonsensical words used to describe it. Even though the reader is met with unfamiliar words from the poem's onset, the appealing language allows for consistent engagement and intrigue throughout. The poem may not actually want to make sense at all, but rather sound interesting enough for our imaginations to wonder and wander.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "t"
- **Line 2:** "g," "g"
- **Line 5:** "B," "J"
- **Line 6:** "j," "b," "c," "c"
- **Line 7:** "B," "J," "b"
- **Line 8:** "B"
- **Line 10:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "S," "T," "t"
- **Line 13:** "A," "a"
- **Line 15:** "w," "w"
- **Line 17:** "O," "t," "O," "t," "th," "th"
- **Line 18:** "s," "s"
- **Line 22:** "m," "m," "b," "b"
- **Line 23:** "C," "C"
- **Line 25:** "T," "t"

- **Line 26:** "g," "g"

ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) also exists in abundance throughout the poem. In the first stanza alone, there is assonance that uses three of the five vowels to produce its internal rhyme. "Brillig," "gimble," and "mimsy" all share assonance with the short /i/ sound; "toves," "borogoves," and "mome" with the long /o/ sound; and "wabe" and "outgrabe" share it with the long /a/ sound.

If we think of poetry as a fundamentally oral art form (or at least an art form that originated in voice rather than on paper), we can imagine how vibrant and rich the read-aloud effect of this poem might be. The sheer variety of assonance comes across as playful and experimental, as though Carroll is testing the limits of the [iambic quatrain](#) to see how many sounds it can produce.

Assonance also helps to clarify some of Carroll's language. In the second to last stanza, "chortled" and "joy" create assonance with a long /o/ sound. Although the word "chortle" has been officially brought into the English language since this poem's publication, it was originally one of Carroll's words and required deciphering. The fact that it has assonance with "joy," highlights that it is a verb with a positive connotation even if we may not have been initially certain about its meaning.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 2:** "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 3:** "i," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 4:** "o," "a"
- **Line 6:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "u," "u," "u"
- **Line 8:** "u," "a"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o"
- **Line 10:** "o," "oe"
- **Line 11:** "o," "e," "u," "u," "ee"
- **Line 17:** "o," "o," "ou," "ou"
- **Line 19:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 23:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 24:** "o," "o"
- **Line 25:** "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 26:** "i," "a"
- **Line 27:** "i," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 28:** "o," "a"

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the lines in "Jabberwocky" are [end-stopped](#). The sonic effect of an end-stopped line is a pause when reading the poem aloud, which lets the poem progress at a steady,

rhythmic pace. This quality underlines how attentive "Jabberwocky" is to sound, and how strictly it clings to an organized structure despite its very loose and creative language. The poem wants to make sense on a sonic level because it knows it cannot do so on a purely linguistic one, and must take several important measures (end-stopped lines included) to create auditory engagement.

An emphatic end-stopped line can also serve as a point of emphasis. In line 5, the father's warning of "Beware the Jabberwock, my son!" draws special attention to the menacing Jabberwock. The second sentence in this stanza is not even a complete sentence ("The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!") as if sheer fear of the Jabberwock has caused the father to blurt out his warning without regard to proper grammar. The exclamation points at the end of each line highlight the father's sense of fear.

In similar fashion (albeit in celebration rather than fear), more end-stopped lines appear when the hero returns home to his father. Each line in this stanza is its own, short sentence, suggesting that the father is so overcome with joy that he can only react in quick bursts of thought (e.g. "O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"). This pattern echoes the father's exclamation of fear in the second stanza, and yet also comes across as humorous for how quickly the father seemed to shift his emotions from fear to happiness.

Carroll also employs end-stopped lines to create suspense. The first line of the fourth stanza, "And, as in uffish thought he stood," conveys relative peace, but immediately spills into "The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame," which introduces the fearsome beast for the first time. The small pause created by the comma after "stood," helps set up the abruptness of the Jabberwock's introduction, catching us by surprise in the same way it stunned the hero.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wabe:"
- **Line 3:** "borogoves,"
- **Line 4:** "outgrabe."
- **Line 5:** "son!"
- **Line 6:** "catch!"
- **Line 8:** "Bandersnatch!"
- **Line 9:** "hand;"
- **Line 10:** "sought—"
- **Line 12:** "thought."
- **Line 13:** "stood,"
- **Line 15:** "wood,"
- **Line 16:** "came!"
- **Line 18:** "snack!"
- **Line 20:** "back."
- **Line 21:** "Jabberwock?"
- **Line 22:** "boy!"

- **Line 23:** "Callay!"
- **Line 24:** "joy."
- **Line 26:** "wabe:"
- **Line 27:** "borogoves,"
- **Line 28:** "outgrabe."

CACOPHONY

[Cacophony](#) in the second, fifth, and sixth stanzas not only creates interesting and appealing sound, but also formally matches the content that it's expressing. In the second stanza, short words like "jaws," "bite," "claws," "catch," "shun," and "snatch," are all connected to the three beasts that the father names. The harsh and unpleasant sounds created by these words suggest that the beasts may possess similarly harsh or unpleasant qualities. "B" sounds in general are made to seem evil in this stanza. Notice how "Beware" is repeated, and how every word with a "b" in is threatening ("bite," "Jubjub bird," "Bandersnatch,"). As if to support this point, the Jabberwock makes a terrible "burling" sound when it appears. We may not know all of the poem's words, but it at least makes an effort to thematically link them via sound so we can interpret their basic connotation.

The fifth stanza's cacophony helps bring the brief battle scene to life. "One, two! One, two!" gives an air of quickness to the combatants' movements, just as "snicker-snack" helps us imagine a sword darting through the air. The rhythm of this stanza's first two sentences is fast and jerky, with three whole sentences existing among them, mirroring the swift actions of the fight. In the sixth stanza, we experience cacophony via the father's laughter. His odd expressions of "my beamish boy!" and "Callooh! Callay!", with their short, resonant sounds, contribute to the joy that causes him to "chortle." This particular cacophony is celebratory in nature, unlike the earlier example associated with the beasts, and demonstrates how different mixtures of sounds can fit with a variety of connotations.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "B," "J"
- **Line 6:** "j," "b," "c," "c"
- **Line 7:** "B," "J," "b," "j," "b," "b," "s"
- **Line 8:** "B," "s"
- **Line 17:** "t," "t"
- **Line 18:** "s," "ck," "s," "ck"
- **Line 22:** "C," "b," "b"
- **Line 23:** "C," "C"

IMAGERY

[Imagery](#) is, rather [paradoxically](#), both obvious and hidden throughout "Jabberwocky." For example, Carroll gives readers enough imagery to get a general idea of what the Jabberwocky

is like, but not nearly enough to actually visualize it in a specific way. Thanks to the hero's father, we know the Jabberwock has "jaws," and "claws," and later on we learn of its flaming eyes. But the rest of its body is unknown, and we are left only with these small bodily fragments to envision.

The decision to leave the Jabberwock mostly ambiguous suggests that it is in fact up to us, the readers, to form a more complete image of this monster if we so desire. In other words, the poem is visually evocative yet still leaves plenty of room for imagination, a feature that it already relies upon heavily with its unusual language.

Given all this novel language, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the poem's first and last stanzas (which contain the largest amount of nonsensical words) are meant to be visually imagined. When translated via Carroll's explanations in *Through the Looking Glass*, the stanza describes an odd kind of badger boring a hole in the side of a wet hill, while a strange kind of bird makes miserable moaning sounds. Yet since we are still unfamiliar with these animals and their habits, it is a hard stanza to visualize even when the nonsense words have been defined. Instead, the stanza relies upon the attractiveness of its linguistic sounds, rather than its meaning, to draw readers in.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 25-28

CLIMAX (FIGURE OF SPEECH)

This poem, being a [ballad](#), has a discernible [climax](#). Because the poem is mostly made up of nonsense words, its structure is vital to readers' basic understanding of the plot. The plot consists of rising action, beginning with the father's words of caution to "beware the Jabberwock" and the other beasts. Eventually, after searching a long while, the son finds the Jabberwock (or rather, the Jabberwock finds him), and fights it. The climax occurs in the fifth stanza, when the speaker's words transition into raw descriptions of action: "One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!" The sentences shorten in this moment and the [caesuras](#) created by the exclamation points increase in frequency, heightening the intensity of the scene. Soon after, the son emerges victorious and leaves for home with the Jabberwock's head in tow.

The fact that the climax is recognizable amidst all these nonsense words proves that we do not need to understand all (or perhaps even most!) of the words in a poem in order for it to make some kind of sense—so long as it follows a recognizable story structure. The poem obeys the common form of a ballad while telling a story that we have heard many times before: a

story of a hero killing a monster and returning home victorious. And yet, the nonsense words are nevertheless apart of the climax and the overall narrative, and make the story more intriguing. It would be much less interesting if the monster were simply a "monster" rather than a "Jabberwock." The clear climax of the poem suggests we can still appreciate nonsense if it abides by a familiar form, even if we may not understand all of it.

Where Climax (Figure of Speech) appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "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."

REPETITION

The first and last stanza of "Jabberwocky," being exact copies of one another, bookend the poem with the same strange, nonsensical scene. From the perspective of a traditional questing narrative, it may make sense to end the poem with the way it began to show that all is as it once was, and that the quest is resolved. However, this [repetition](#) may suggest something more.

The phrase "'Twas brillig" is strange because, according to *Through the Looking Glass*, it designates a specific time: around 4 o'clock in the afternoon when broiling for dinner occurs (the same time that the poem began). In general, the passage of time throughout "Jabberwocky" is difficult to follow. We do not know how long the hero spends searching for the Jabberwock in the third stanza, nor how long he rests by the Tumtum tree. The events in the poem could have taken place within 24 hours, or possibly much more; we do not know how much time happened between the two "brillig" hours.

The animals in this repeated stanza, the "borogoves" and "raths," make the same unpleasant noises that they did in the beginning. Whether or not they are making these noises because it is "brillig" or because they sense the presence of some mysterious danger is a fact left unknown, and we are left to wonder if something bad could still happen. The repetition, then, instead of providing a sense of closure, might suggest that slaying the Jabberwock did not secure a sense of peace for the inhabitants of this strange land. In fact, nothing has changed—and danger could still be lying in wait.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: / All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe."
- **Lines 25-28:** "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: / All mimsy were the

borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe.”

CAESURA

"Jabberwocky" reads in a lilting, almost sing-songy manner thanks to its many [caesuras](#), which is partly how it engages readers in spite of its complicated language. These pauses are also strategic, however, and fluctuate the poem's rhythm to match its content. In lines 6 and 7, for example, caesuras occur while the father lists the many things his son should "beware" on his quest. The small pause in between "bite" and the description of "claws," as well as the one in between "bird" and the description of the "Bandersnatch," create suspense before each ensuing threat. These threats build on one another in list form, conveying a growing sense of trepidation. By formally separating the threats throughout the stanza, each is able to receive more emphasis and appear more worthy of fear.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas (specifically, in lines 17 and 23), caesuras occur at a quicker clip. In line 17, two exclamation points make the line more abrupt, underlining the jerky experience of the fight that is taking place. The caesura in line 19, after "dead," contrasts this moment with slowness, helping to add weight and importance to the Jabberwock's death, acting almost as a kind of closure. In line 23, in the next stanza, caesuras convey speed again, separating the father's positive exclamations from one another ("O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"). The suddenness of each pause highlights the father's absolute delight. He can hardly speak in complete sentences because of his happiness.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** [“];
- **Line 6:** [“];
- **Line 7:** [“];
- **Line 13:** [“];
- **Line 14:** [“];
- **Line 17:** “!,” “!”
- **Line 19:** [“];
- **Line 23:** “!,” “!”
- **Line 25:** [“];

ENJAMBMENT

Though much of the poem is [end-stopped](#), there are a few important [enjambments](#). Most significantly, the fifth stanza has two lines that are enjambed (line 17 and line 19). This scene, however, is the climax of the poem, which conveys a rapid fight between the hero and the Jabberwock. By removing the pause at the end of these lines, Carroll speeds up the reading experience of the stanza to better convey the speed and suddenness of the fight scene. This speed stands out all the more when compared to the other stanzas in the poem, which

are all mostly end-stopped.

Line 14 is also arguably enjambed rather than end-stopped, despite its final comma, since the grammar, syntax, and full meaning of the line—the full image of the fearsome Jabberwock—is only clear after also reading line 15. The enjambment, in a sea of end-stops, here creates a moment of suspense—what is the Jabberwock, with its eyes of flame about to do to the hero standing in "uffish thought"?

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “toves / Did”
- **Lines 7-8:** “shun / The”
- **Lines 11-12:** “tree / And”
- **Lines 14-15:** “flame, / Came”
- **Lines 17-18:** “through / The”
- **Lines 19-20:** “head / He”
- **Lines 25-26:** “toves / Did”



VOCABULARY

Brillig (Line 1, Line 25) - According to *Through the Looking Glass*, it is the time in the afternoon when one begins broiling things for dinner, usually around 4 p.m.

Slithy (Line 1, Line 25) - A combination of "lithe" (meaning quick and graceful) and "slimy." Note that the "i" is pronounced as a long vowel, not a short one.

Toves (Line 1, Line 25) - In *Through the Looking Glass*, the character Humpty Dumpty says that "toves" are a combination of badgers, lizards, and corkscrews that live off cheese.

Gyre (Line 2, Line 26) - Gyre means to spin around or whirl. In context, the toves "gyre" to dig a hole in the side of a wet hill, or the "wabe."

Gimble (Line 2, Line 26) - Humpty Dumpty says that "gimble" means "to make holes like a gimlet," which is a small hand-tool used to drill holes in wood without it splitting.

Wabe (Line 2, Line 26) - A small, wet hill soaked with rain. It is the ground that the "toves" dig into in the first stanza.

Mimsy (Line 3, Line 27) - An invention of Carroll's that means both "flimsy" and "miserable."

Borogoves (Line 3, Line 27) - According to *Through the Looking Glass*, borogoves are disheveled birds with mop-like feathers and no wings. Carroll says it is an extinct kind of parrot.

Mome (Line 4, Line 28) - Oddly, even Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* is unsure about this word. He thinks it means "from home" as though someone has "lost their way" from home. Perhaps his unknowingness is validation that we do not have to bother ourselves with understanding each word in the poem.

Raths (Line 4, Line 28) - Humpty Dumpty says raths are a "sort of green pig."

Outgrabe (Line 4, Line 28) - Humpty Dumpty says that "outgrabing" is a mixture of bellowing and whistling that also includes a sneeze.

Jabberwock (Line 5, Line 14, Line 21) - The Jabberwock is the namesake monster of the poem. We do not know exactly what it looks like, but we do know that it has menacing features, including "claws" and "eyes of flame." It is often depicted as a kind of dragon.

Jubjub Bird (Line 7) - The Jubjub bird is another kind of menacing beast. In a poem called "[The Hunting of the Snark](#)," Carroll describes it as a "desperate bird that lives in perpetual passion." We aren't quite sure what to make of it here, but we know that we should "beware" it, as the father says.

Frumious (Line 8) - A combination of "fuming" and "furious," as noted in Carroll's preface to the poem "[The Hunting of the Snark](#)."

Bandersnatch (Line 8) - In "[The Hunting of the Snark](#)," we learn that a bandersnatch is a fast creature with snapping jaws that can stretch its neck to attack its prey.

Vorpal (Line 9, Line 18) - Carroll did not define this word in any of his published writing, so we can only make guesses as to what it means. Perhaps it is a kind of metal, or maybe it is a particular style of sword.

Manxome (Line 10) - This is another word with an unclear definition, but it sounds like it could be substituting for the word "fearsome."

Whiffling and Burbled (Line 15, Line 16) - Both words denote sounds that the Jabberwock makes when it appears. They resemble a kind of howling or warbling, likely meant to induce fear in the hero, who is taken by surprise.

Tulgey (Line 15) - Tulgey is yet another word that Carroll never defines. Since we know it is an adjective modifying "wood," we might take it to mean "dark" or "dense," which are two common descriptions of woods that make them seem evil or mysterious.

Snicker-Snack (Line 18) - Snicker-snack is an [onomatopoeia](#), mimicking the sound of the sword cutting into the Jabberwock. Though violent, the phrase also contains a hint of whimsy (the first half is "snicker," which is a short, suppressed laugh, as though the sword itself is smirking in victory).

Galumphing (Line 20) - Like "chortle," "galumphing" has since become an accepted word in the English language. It means to move about in a clumsy or otherwise inelegant manner, which makes sense given that the hero returned home with the Jabberwock's cumbersome head.

Beamish (Line 22) - Similar to "beaming," "beamish" is Carroll's way of describing the son's jubilant smile.

Frabjous (Line 23) - We know "frabjous" has a positive

connotation because the father uses it to describe the "day" that his son came home with the slain Jabberwock. It sounds like a combination of "fabulous" and "joyous," and is immediately followed by the father's exclamations of "Callooh!" and "Callay!" which express joy.

Callooh and Callay (Line 23) - These words are exclamations of joy that the father utters in celebration at the return of his victorious son. They sound like "Woo hoo!" and "Hooray!" which, of course, share similar meanings.

Chortled (Line 24) - "Chortled" is Carroll's way of combining "snorted" and "chuckled." It is an odd, whimsical laughing sound.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The verse form of "Jabberwocky" is that of a [ballad](#), with seven quatrains. Traditionally, a ballad tells a story of love or adventure, and is divided into four-line stanzas that obey a specific rhyme scheme and meter. This is the case here, as the stanzas also follow a fairly regular ABAB rhyme scheme and [iambic](#) meter.

Despite the poem's strange language, the fact that it's arranged into a ballad helps readers understand that an adventure or quest is taking place: the specific form of the poem is appropriate to the story, wherein a hero sets out to defeat a monster, the "Jabberwock," and returns home triumphantly.

While "Jabberwocky" does not formally deviate from the ballad form, it certainly seems to play with it by making little to no sense at all in many places (again, because so many of these words were made up by Carroll). In effect, readers rely on the familiar ballad form for the poem's story to remain comprehensible on a basic level. Without it, the poem would likely stand as a haphazard jumble of strange words.

METER

The meter of "Jabberwocky" is mostly [iambic](#) tetrameter, meaning that there are four feet per line, each foot containing one iambic unit. Take line 14, for example:

The Jabb | erwock, | with eyes | of flame,

The exception to this rule is that the last line of each stanza has only three feet, making it iambic trimeter. Look at line 12:

And stood | awhile | in thought.

In general, this rather straightforward meter complements the poem's diction well. Many words are either just one or two syllables, allowing them to fit snugly into this iambic form. The overall metrical regularity also helps readers better understand the poem, the actual language of which is quite strange. An

easy-to-follow meter makes the poem seem more inviting; if its meter were scattered or disorganized, we would have a much harder time wrapping our heads around a poem that already resists sensibility!

There is a particularly notable moment when the meter breaks. Line 8 has seven syllables, not six, and resists a clear meter. We could scan it as follows:

The frumious Bandersnatch!

This line notably occurs at a moment of startled fear as the father rattles off menacing features of various beasts. The fact that this particular line disobeys the meter actually fits the content—it is meant to stand out from the other lines to create suspense and shock at the existence of this monster.

RHYME SCHEME

Four of the poem's seven stanzas follow this regular rhyme scheme:

ABAB

This pattern is another trademark of the [ballad](#) form. The regularity of the rhyme scheme supplies the poem with a sense of organization amidst its odd language. In other words, this recognizable pattern of rhymes allows the poem to make sense on a basic auditory level; we may not know what all the words *mean*, but our ears nevertheless easily latch onto the poem's relatively consistent perfect rhymes. These strong rhymes suggest that the poem is in fact prioritizing sound over the meaning of each of its words. Rather than offer one, precise story using conventional language, the poem wants its readers to listen and imagine a strange world for themselves.

A secondary, but very similar, rhyme scheme characterizes the remaining three stanzas.

ABCB

In each of these stanzas, the "C" line (that is, the third line in the [quatrain](#)) is characterized by [internal rhyme](#). For example, in line 11, "tree" does not rhyme with any of the other ending words, but rather has internal rhyme with "he." It's no coincidence that the rhyme scheme changes for the first time in the same moment that the hero rests by the Tumtum tree. This little sonic blip keeps the readers on their toes: we cannot get lulled into lazy reading, just as the hero must remain alert as he waits around for the Jabberwock.

This secondary rhyme scheme repeats in the fifth stanza. In line 19, the quick succession of "dead" and "head" makes the hero's victory seem quick and definitive, as though the Jabberwock may not have been quite as menacing a figure as the father made it out to be. In line 23, when the father announces his joy, the words "day" and "Callay" offer a sense of immediacy to his positive reaction, as though he could not contain his happiness. The overall impression provided by the poem's many rhymes is

that it is playful in its effort to produce as many connected sounds as possible. Even if its language is imprecise and inventive, its sounds are carefully structured.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Jabberwocky" reads from a [third-person limited perspective](#) and is not an actual character from the poem. The speaker nevertheless seems to be someone from the same world in which the poem takes place, or at least someone deeply familiar with this world's taxonomy.

There are moments when the hero's father seems to take on the role of speaker because of his dialogue—the father is the only character to actually talk in the poem—but we know the father cannot actually be the narrator of the poem itself, since he has to verify with his son whether he did indeed slay the Jabberwock (something the speaker of the poem would have to know).

Over the course of the poem, the speaker maintains a consistently whimsical tone, intensifying slightly when there is action (often by using more exclamation points, as in the fifth stanza). This consistency is partly bolstered by the poem's very regular rhyme scheme and meter. Overall, the speaker seems most like an enthusiastic and assertive storyteller, taking time to offer detailed descriptions of objects and events even if these come across as nonsensical to the reader.



SETTING

The setting of "Jabberwocky" is difficult to ascertain, though it appears to be a sort of fantastical land filled with mysterious creatures and heroic quests. There are several strange animals described in the first stanza, and we know that they are close to a wet hill. We can also assume that the hero navigates a forest or wooded area because he rests by a "Tumtum tree" and the Jabberwock appears from a "tulgey wood."

"Jabberwocky" relies on descriptions of figures and actions, however nonsensical they might seem, instead of devoting time to setting us in a particular location. Like the Jabberwock itself, the setting is left for readers to imagine in more detail. Yet because of the poem's traditional [ballad](#) form and familiar narrative, it's easy enough to envision the type of fantasy land or kingdom in which it might take place.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Jabberwocky" originally appeared in Lewis Carroll's novel [Through the Looking-Glass](#) (the sequel to [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#)). *Through the Looking-Glass* is a whimsical children's

book famously centered around the protagonist Alice's fantastical adventures in a world called Wonderland. It also includes Carroll's (almost equally absurd) poem "[The Walrus and the Carpenter](#)."

"Jabberwocky" is an example of Victorian "nonsense" verse. Broadly, nonsense literature is characterized by whimsical humor, eccentric characters, and the use of poetic elements that both facilitate and hinder meaning. Carroll, along with his contemporary Edward Lear, pioneered the nonsense genre in the mid-1800s. His mixtures of prose and poetry are conventionally structured but packed with wordplay, absurd characters, and logically impossible situations. Carroll often preferred words for their *sound* rather than their *meaning*, and while "Jabberwocky" uses the steady meter and rhyme scheme of a [ballad](#), its story is extremely silly and random.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) wrote in mid-19th-century England, during the Victorian era (1837-1901). This was a time of rapidly accumulating wealth and economic progress, as a result of both the British Empire's colonial expansion and the Industrial Revolution. Population increased almost everywhere in the British Isles (except in Ireland during the Great Famine), and London became a booming metropolis. Conditions for the working class, however, remained awful. Many poorer people, including children, worked long hours in unsanitary factories and mines, which were often breeding grounds for infectious diseases.

Although literature thrived thanks to the general increase in wealth and population, much of it focused on the social problems connected to both, particularly income inequality and the widening gap between social classes. The idea that literature could include nonsensical humor was still a foreign concept to many people, yet it was in the realm of whimsy and laughter that Carroll thrived—perhaps partly in reaction to the struggles of the time.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Lewis Carroll Biography and Works](#) — The Academy of

American Poets website, apart from being a premier resource for all things poetry, has information about Carroll's biography and notable works. (<https://poets.org/poet/lewis-carroll>)

- [Nonsense Literature](#) — This website, created by Carleton College, contains a solid overview of nonsense literature in the context of Carroll's "Alice" books. (<https://www.carleton.edu/departments/ENGL/Alice/CritNonsense.html>)
- [Benedict Cumberbatch Reading "Jabberwocky"](#) — A youtube video of British actor Benedict Cumberbatch's elegant reading of Carroll's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_Um3787fSY)
- [Link to "The Hunting of the Snark"](#) — This much longer poem by Lewis Carroll explains many of the odd words found in "Jabberwocky." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43909/the-hunting-of-the-snark>)
- [Illustration of the Jabberwock by John Tenniel](#) — Although there are many depictions of Carroll's mysterious monster, John Tenniel's is perhaps the most iconic. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jabberwocky.jpg#/media/File:TheJabberwocky.png>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LEWIS CARROLL POEMS

- [You Are Old, Father William](#)



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