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Nonsense, Language, and Logic in *Through the Looking Glass*

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Abstract:

Many attempts have been made over the years to define the term Nonsense and despite its many definitions and perceptions the common element that surfaces, in the study and analysis of this term, is the binary opposites that are created in the process. This paper attempts to analyse the peculiar interplay of the paradoxical elements of Sense and Nonsense, Order and Disorder that pervades in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, and also see what bearing they have on Alice, who encounters creatures in wonderland that perpetually make her question and interrogate her own understanding of language, logic and nonsense. This seminal work of children's literature is marked by a distinct and unparalleled charm rendered through the logician and mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson that makes it a perfect choice for the adult reader as well. The interplay of reality and fantasy and the subversive elements in the text make it an interesting read that challenges conventional notions of order and decorum. Many attempts have been made over the years to define the term Nonsense and despite its many definitions and perceptions the common element that surfaces, in the study and analysis of this term, is the binary opposites that are created in the process. This paper attempts to analyse the peculiar interplay of the paradoxical elements of Sense and Nonsense, Order and Disorder that pervades in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, and also see what bearing they have on Alice, who encounters creatures in wonderland that perpetually make her question and interrogate her own understanding of language, logic and nonsense. This seminal work of children's literature is marked by a distinct and unparalleled charm rendered through the logician and mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson that makes it a perfect choice for the adult reader as well. The interplay of reality and fantasy and the subversive elements in the text make it an interesting read that challenges conventional notions of order and decorum.

Key Words:

Nonsense literature, sense, language, logic, children's literature, order- disorder, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the looking glass*.

Over the years many attempts have been made to define the term Nonsense and despite its many definitions and perceptions the common element that surfaces, in the study and analysis of this term, is the binary opposites that are created in the process. This paper attempts to analyse the peculiar interplay of the paradoxical elements of Sense and Nonsense, Order and Disorder that pervades in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, and also see what bearing they have on Alice, who encounters creatures in wonderland that perpetually make her question and interrogate her own understanding of language, logic and nonsense.

According to Jacqueline Flescher: "The backbone of nonsense must be a consciously regulated pattern. It can be the rhythmic structure of verse, the order of a legal procedure, or the rules of the chess game." (128) Interestingly all these variations can be found in the Alice books. The Queen's, "Sentence first, verdict afterwards." "implies a knowledge of the normal sequence of events. Running backwards is a reversal of conventional order, legalized by the mirror; and the chess game provides a structural setting for inconsequential behavior. It is a departure from this existent or implicit order which distinguishes nonsense from sense." (128-29) The usual way of upsetting the conventional order of events is by reversal. This simple pattern is repeated constantly and can be

seen in the Unicorn's suggestion to Alice on how to distribute the cake, "Hand it round first, cut it afterwards." (TLG*¹, 185) Also Alice asks the white Queen, "...What sort of things do you remember best?" and the Queen answers. "O, things that happened the week after the next." (TLG, 155)

All these mind-boggling reversals confuse Alice yet this confusion is really a product of her own commitment to the ordinary world, her doing justice to the lessons she has learnt and been trained into since she was born. We might even begin to feel that it is she, not her looking glass interlocutors, who is actually illogical. Most commentators on Alice believe the opposite, that the insanity is in the looking glass world, not in the real. But Nonsense, in the writings of Lewis Carroll, does not mean gibberish; it is not chaos, but the opposite of chaos. It is only in the shallowest sense that a trip through the looking glass world would reveal disorder and nonsense. Carroll's world of fantasy, in its semantic aspects at least, is a world that a logician would yearn for, as can be seen in Alice's encounter with the live flowers:

"It (the tree) could bark," said the Rose.
 "It says 'Boughwough!'," cried the daisy, "That's why its branches are called boughs!" (TLG, 122)

The concept of onomatopoeia gives rise to a logical conclusion that the boughs should be able to bark since the word reminds one of the barking sounds! The linguistic similarity leads to functionality. The unavoidable suggestion is that where our everyday language is largely arbitrary and unaccountable, in the fantasy world the name of a thing is intrinsically connected with its nature. Rather than keeping a track of events that happened in the past, the looking glass world operates on the basis of spoken words which, when uttered, give rise to actions. Tweedledum and Tweedledee begin to quarrel immediately after Alice recites the rhyme about the broken rattle and just when she describes the classic rhyme related to Humpty Dumpty does he actually fall here in the fantasy world. The apparent disorder concealing deep logic is an effective satiric weapon used by Lewis Carroll.

This inclination towards a hidden order in the apparent chaos is a master craftsman's strategy that can be seen in the very beginning of *Through the Looking Glass* when Alice steps across the looking glass in her house to find herself in an alternative reality and her first encounter is with the figurines of a chess game. The chess game and the train journey serve as metaphors for the trajectory of Alice's life, over which she has little control. The perspectives and movements of the creatures of the looking glass world are guided by the movements of their respective chess pieces. The rigidly constructed rules of a chess game guide Alice to a preordained conclusion that will eventually make her a queen and lead her towards her inevitable maturation and acquiring of womanhood. Just as Alice herself had been an angry governess for her kitten counting all her mistakes and fixing a judgement day, the Red Queen in the looking glass world presents a caricature of the quintessential Victorian governess, obsessive about manners, belching out behavioral advice to her supposed charges. When Alice sees the large chess game before her, she is excited by the prospects of playing the game herself, not realizing that she has been a part of it since her very entry into this fantasy world and her thrill of wanting to be a pawn has already come true since her every step has been carefully planned and executed. The train journey has already given her a head start as the pawn moves two boxes in its first move. She exclaims, "It's a great huge game of chess that's being played- all over the world- if this is the world at all, you know..... I wouldn't mind being a pawn, if only I might join- though of course I should *like* to be a Queen best." (TLG, 126) The chess game

¹ * Following abbreviations will be used for subsequent quotations: AW- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, TLG- Through the Looking Glass.

thus, is being used strategically as a guiding narrative by Carroll to suggest the play of larger forces like fate and destiny that mark a preordained future for the characters and exhibit the looming presence of a larger design that is marked by rules and logic.

Michael Heyman, in the introduction to his book says that, “Nonsense is a structured play with language and logic.” (xx) It is this very spirit of play that predominates in Carroll’s works. It is the inverse logic applied in the fantasy world that disturbs Alice and makes her rework her ideas of sense and nonsense. She contradicts the Red Queen, “a hill *can’t* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense – “The Red Queen shook her head, “You may call it nonsense if you like,” she said “but *I’ve* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary.” (TLG, 125-26) It takes Alice quite a lot of unlearning to come to terms with and decipher the equally logical claims of the creatures across the looking glass. Her mind, heart and soul have been instructed in a manner that she finds difficult to break free from and yet the child in her, who is discovering a whole new world, is pulled towards the apparent logic that this fantasy world’s creatures seem to uphold and defend quite vociferously.

The idea of reversal also manifests itself visually in the form of the nonsense poem ‘Jabberwocky’. The reversal is evident in the inverse print of the poem which is quite logical since the book falls within the domain of the looking glass world. It does not take much thinking for the logical minded Alice to figure out that to bring the words to the ‘right way’ (TLG,122) she would need to hold the book up to the looking glass. The fluid binaries of right and wrong are questioned again here. This poem falls in the fifth category of the classification of nonsense, made by Annette Baier, in the article on Nonsense in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Flescher 5) This category refers to the sort of nonsense that can be produced “by taking a respectable sentence and replacing one or more words by nonsense words.” Other categories involve looking at nonsense as something “obviously false”, as a “wildly inapposite remark”, as “sentences involving category errors”, as “strings of words which lack any clear syntactic structure” and finally, as “gibberish” (Diamond 5) all of which are present somewhere or the other in both the Alice books.

According to this category then, the poem follows the syntactical rules and works within the formal structure of language. Both the serial pattern of rhyme and rhythm and the grammatical structure are here combined. This category of Nonsense arises from absence of meaning of some definite sort. But this human tendency of assigning traditionally accepted meanings to things is precisely what defeats the purpose of Nonsense literature. For “Nonsense,” as Michael Heyman says, “is valuable simply for its own sake.” (xx) It is the exuberance, the sheer joy in the musicality of language, the sound and rhythmic quality of Nonsense prose or verse that one needs to revel in.

At the same time Nonsense operates not by ignoring the rules of sense but by subversively playing with them—stretching, squeezing, flipping upside down, yet, in the end, still depending on their existence. Indeed, Nonsense usually emerges from an excess of sense rather than a lack of it or, as Wim Tigges states, in ‘An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense’, through a “multiplicity of meaning [balanced] with a simultaneous absence of meaning.” (Heyman xxiv) This multiplicity of meaning can be seen clearly in the use of some of the characteristic linguistic techniques of Nonsense. They include Neologism—the invention of new words like, ‘jubjub’, ‘bandersnatch’, ‘brillig’ (TLG, 117) and Portmanteau words which, as Humpty Dumpty puts it, are “two meanings packed up into one word” (TLG,170). Some of these are ‘slithy’, a combination of ‘lithe’ and ‘slimy’, ‘frumious’—made of ‘furious’ and ‘fuming’, and ‘mimsy’, a combination of ‘flimsy’ and ‘miserable’. (Bose 13) These words are significant because they embrace two disparate elements. They are a combination, not only of two definitions, but also of two systems, language and logic. They create a new meaning, result in a new ‘truth’ and a unique kind of syllogism. Yet we are also aware of the fact that not all

pairs of apparent concrete propositions can lead to a meaningful/ valid conclusion. This takes us back to the realization that Nonsense needs to be enjoyed for its own sake.

The theory of language states that it is arbitrary, that names are randomly and arbitrarily conferred upon things by humans for their own convenience, that there is no connection between the signifier and the signified. But having read about the underlying logic behind the so-called nonsense of the looking glass world one can say that the best degree of nonsense requires an immense amount of technical expertise. Nonsense too works through logic, grammatically correct language and a knowledge of a signifying system. This is the reason why Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a mathematician, popularly seen as a schizophrenic as well, found a unique means of adjustment in channelizing his brains towards writing and his obsessive compulsion towards order found its most perfect expression in nonsense. It is not for nothing that Alice, in her encounter with the looking glass insects, says that “Language is worth a thousand pounds a word” (TLG,131) Despite its arbitrariness and abstractness, language has a deep meaning, an inverse logic that makes it valuable even in its most unfathomable form. The potency of the words, the way they are put together and used by every individual, is what excited Dodgson the mathematician scholar and Carroll, the nonsense writer.

Another characteristic feature, especially of Indian Nonsense, is reduplication of letters or words. This can be seen in some of the Nonsense words of ‘Jabberwocky’ as well. Words like ‘Jubjub’ and ‘Tumtum’(TLG,117) lend a rhythmic quality to the poem that children relish. Even though the variety of interpretations to the meaning of the poem ‘Jabberwocky’, particularly the first stanza, indicate the futility of the exercise, yet a look at them would indeed show the richness of the poem.

The first, the literal English translation, provided by Brinda Bose, is as follows:

“It was evening and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hillside; all unhappy were the parrots, and the grave turtles squeaked out.” (13)

The second is Humpty Dumpty’s interpretation given to Alice in chapter six, which can be seen as an account of animals resembling badgers, lizards, and corkscrews, going through various gyrations in the plot of land around a sundial during a part of the afternoon when one begins broiling things for dinner.

The third is one made by a child, “It means a bug that comes out at night with a light on its tail and a sword between its beak. That’s what a jabberwalkie is.” (Flescher 132)

The fourth is yet another given by a child which acts as “a valuable key to the relationship between form and meaning. ‘He (Carroll) wrote it in language, that almost makes sense when you read it. The words sound and are spelt like normal words in English, but the poem is imaginary in its physical language.’” (Flescher 133)

And the list is endless. But what is clear through all this is what Michael Heyman also says in his Introduction that “Good Nonsense engages the reader. It must ‘invite interpretation’ (Win Tigges), implying that sense can be made, but at the same time it must foil attempts to make sense in many of the traditional ways.” (xxiv) This is precisely why ‘Jabberwocky’ “seems very pretty” to Alice even though “it’s rather hard to understand.” It “fills (her) head with ideas” (TLG, 119) whereas the later simple poem of Humpty Dumpty does not interest her much. This shows the universal appeal of the poem, the verbal play and nonsense of which show a hostile impulse and a rebelliousness on Lewis Carroll’s part who, probably, aims to satirize the senselessness of the world. Manifested in

the poem can be seen a longing to break through the barriers of conventional language and achieve a state of free utterance, what many have called a “linguistic nirvana”.

Another interesting observation made by Elizabeth Sewell in ‘The Balance of Brillig’ (381-82) regarding the Nonsense words of the poem “Jabberwocky” is that in Nonsense vocabulary, nouns and adjectives play the biggest part. She places nonsense words into normal grammatical categories identifying ‘gimble’, ‘outgrabe’, ‘galumphing’ and ‘chortled’ as verbs, ‘dong’, ‘rath’ as nouns and words like ‘tulgey’, ‘uffish’, ‘manxome’, characterized by a typical adjectival suffix, as adjectives. All this reminds us of the interesting and thought provoking comments that Humpty Dumpty makes on the nature of words, “They’ve a temper, some of them-particularly verbs: they’re the proudest-adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs.”,(TLG,169) and how they can be made to mean just ‘one’ thing, the things which its user intends and nothing else. “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean- neither more nor less.” And “the question is, which is to be master...that’s all.”(TLG, 169) Nonsense operates by creating a balance between sense and nonsense and interestingly the chief language expert in the Alice books is himself in such a state; sitting cross-legged with a cravat on, on top of such a narrow wall, that Alice was amazed as to how he could keep his balance. Edward Lear, the English illustrator, artist and Carroll’s predecessor who popularised the nonsense poems called limericks also played with this precarious balance between sense and nonsense. As the twentieth child of twenty-one children who lived an uncomfortable life since his father lost all his fortune when Lear was just four years old, Lear mostly portrayed children with shades of rebellion in his works. This equates with the belief that Nonsense itself is a form of rebellion which Lear manifests in both form and content. Since childhood he had suffered from asthma and the “terrible demons” (Makman) of epilepsy that made him make morbid disease drawings for doctors and hospitals. He mocked the conventional, moral tales of the Victorian age by making his verse provide an escape from reality and also the formal constraints of the English language. The central figures in his works are creatures that embark on extraordinary voyages which resembles the plot of the Alice books a lot. Michael Heyman says that Nonsense must involve caricature as well and this is quite extensively applied in the popular caricatured characters of both Lear and Carroll’s works.

Preoccupation with meaning is also constant throughout *Through the Looking Glass*. Relationships between words and reference are highlighted because order is created by language and disorder by reference. Names then acquire a lot of importance.

“What’s your name, child?” asks the Queen of Hearts. (AW, 60)
Humpty Dumpty, when Alice says, “My name is Alice, but...”, responds
“It’s a stupid enough name, what does it mean?”
“Must a name mean something?” asks Alice.
“Of-course it must.” (TLG, 165)

The Fawn also asks her, “What do you call yourself?” to which she replies, “I wish I knew”
“...Nothing just now.” (TLG, 137-38)

Hence, we see Alice at her most vulnerable self. Towards the end of the book, even though things continue to have names, it is the reality of the things rather than the names that are questioned. What she only contemplates in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, “...for it might end, you know, in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what it should be like then?” (AW, 6) threatens her with the possibility of actually coming true in *Through the Looking Glass*. “Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his (Red King’s) dream,” says Tweedledee, “If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you’d go out band!... just like a candle!”

“You know very well you’re not real.”

“I am real!” said Alice and began to cry. (TLG, 148)

Her attempt to assert her identity in a world she has just discovered, one that threatens to wipe out her very existence and put her in an existential crisis and dilemma, is testimony to her attempts to maneuver through and grapple with the new found logic system that defies the logic of ‘her’ own world. Finally, when either language or reference is threatened or destroyed, the playful argument of nonsense is abandoned. Alice tries to assert her identity and maintain a last modicum of sanity by declaring:

“I know they’re talking nonsense, and it’s foolish to talk about it.” (TLG, 148)

In the end, it’s only when Alice becomes Queen, the fulfillment of her ardent wish, and when she “can’t stand this any longer!” (TLG, 213) that she tries to get away from the so called chaotic, nonsense world. Ironically, she does it by putting it into a further state of disorder and chaos. In the end we, as readers, are left with graver philosophical issues of “Which dreamed it?” (TLG, 216) to grapple with which makes us wonder about the subject of the story herself / himself.

Hence, we can see that throughout the two books Nonsense pervades, yet we need to notice that it is not simply a formal structure because grammatical structure here runs counter to content. And content in turn makes one analyze a series of binary opposites and paradoxes as has been discussed in the paper. It is with an analysis of these that one can see how meaning, and meaninglessness, order and disorder governing formal pattern and reference respectively, sense and nonsense and sense even as an alternative sense, can be seen as governing the wonderland where Alice finds herself.

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BIO-NOTE

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