

## **“The Great Fall” of Authority**

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As Alice journeys through Wonderland and Looking-glass Land, she encounters a variety of characters whose nonsensical assertions call into question her tacit ontological assumptions. The strange logic these characters introduce to Alice forces her to acknowledge and reevaluate learned perceptions that she had previously accepted as objective truths. Because many of Carroll’s absurdities bear an exaggerated but recognizable resemblance to observable phenomena in society, the paradoxically meaningful nonsense causes Alice (and the reader) to experience epiphanies about the nature of the phenomena Carroll satirizes. In this way, Carroll cleverly, and ironically, uses nonsense to raise consciousness. Specifically, Carroll employs nonsense in the Alice books to construct a satirical, dystopian view of authority. One example can be inferred from Alice’s humorous inability to remember her lessons, or memorized propaganda from schoolmasters (who have authority over knowledge). Because Alice suddenly cannot remember what these schoolmasters have forced her to learn, the lessons are consequently illustrated as useless and asinine, and the teachers as senseless, counterproductive, and undeserving of the position of authority they have secured. Carroll ultimately ridicules authority figures, pedagogues in particular, through the character Humpty Dumpty. His hyperbolic depiction of Humpty Dumpty as a narcissist, a pedant, and a charlatan exposes authority figures for what they often are: unnecessary, and even disadvantageous.

Humpty Dumpty's narcissism is immediately apparent. As soon as Alice stumbles upon him, Humpty Dumpty proclaims his self-importance and implies Alice's inferiority. He is extremely defensive and unwilling to consider any remark that he perceives as potentially criticizing, since he believes himself to be a superior creature. The egg therefore responds to Alice's unintentionally insulting comments by ridiculing her, thereby shifting the negative attention to Alice so that he can preserve his inflated self-image and gain control over the conversation. In addition to belittling Alice to demonstrate his power, Humpty Dumpty egregiously boasts about his connection with the King to illustrate his elite status. Humpty Dumpty's arrogant behavior, including bragging about his affiliation with the King, can primarily be attributed to the power and authority he believes he deserves for being an intellectual. Humpty Dumpty clearly views himself as extraordinarily brilliant; he is so inordinately intelligent that he knows the answers to all questions (232). While Humpty Dumpty knows everything, everyone else, particularly Alice, knows nothing: "'Wrong!' Humpty Dumpty exclaim[s] triumphantly.... 'You don't know what you're talking about!'" (235, 237). The egg's egotism, and Alice's willingness to put up with it, establishes Humpty Dumpty's authoritative role throughout their interaction. His pomposity is finally complete at the chapter's conclusion when he abruptly dismisses Alice, informing her that she is common and unworthy of his remembering her. Humpty Dumpty's behavior serves to keep him in control of the conversation and its conclusion, as well as to implicitly establish himself as unique and memorable through his declaration of Alice's mediocrity. According to Humpty Dumpty, he "'shouldn't know [Alice] again if [they] *did* meet... [because she's] so exactly like other people'" (244-245). On the contrary, Humpty Dumpty's narcissism

leads him to perceive his acquaintanceship to be impressive and unforgettable, and certainly not simply because he is a talking egg in a cravat.

While Carroll's depiction of Humpty Dumpty as a narcissistic egg represents a portion of the amusing nonsense that comprises the Alice books, this portrayal of Humpty Dumpty simultaneously serves to warn readers about how unacceptable and destructive such a characteristic in authority figures can be. The adversity of Humpty Dumpty's narcissism is established by the fact that he is an egg sitting atop a narrow wall, a ridiculous character on an undeserved pedestal. Humpty Dumpty's excessive self-love prevents him from being "down to earth," as well as from being able to be on "common ground" with anyone else. Instead, Humpty Dumpty teeters on his wall in a world of his own, condescendingly looking down at anyone who passes by. The fate of the conceited Humpty Dumpty is inevitable; it is the nursery rhyme's promise that he will have "a great fall." Using the common knowledge of Humpty Dumpty's tragic destiny to his advantage, Carroll demonstrates that overconfidence is dangerous, and often catastrophic.

In addition to his laughable narcissism, particularly regarding his intellectual merit, Humpty Dumpty is portrayed as a pedant throughout his interaction with Alice. He is a rigid, rule-based thinker who dominates intellectual discussions with his own agenda. Throughout his conversation with Alice, Humpty Dumpty delivers a series of pedantic lectures that appoint him as an intellectual authority figure and altercast Alice as someone in need of his invaluable instruction. Humpty Dumpty claims to be the master of meaning: "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty [says] in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less'" (238). He has command over language, taming personified verbs and adjectives (238), as well as taming anyone

foolish enough to interrupt him (242). Humpty Dumpty compulsively and authoritatively hogs the spotlight throughout the entire conversation with Alice with his supposed immense body of wisdom. The egg's ostentatious display of knowledge, as well as his strict adherence to arbitrary rules, is most evident, however, in his lecture on "Jabberwocky." He gives Alice a strict definition for each word in the poem, allowing no room for interpretation about the words' meanings. According to Humpty Dumpty, the meaning of the poem is fixed and everyone must share a uniform understanding of it, that, of course, being Humpty Dumpty's interpretation. His inflexible views on literature and communication clearly establish him as an autocrat who limits meaning and restricts options.

Carroll's depiction of Humpty Dumpty as a pedant demonstrates the adverse effects of rigid authority figures that lecture excessively. The egg's authoritarian reign over knowledge certainly seems to stifle creative thinking and intellectual possibility. Rather than expanding knowledge, Humpty Dumpty confines it by guarding a wall, which acts as a barrier to intellectual exploration and growth for everyone with whom he comes into contact. Thus while the narrow wall serves as a pedestal for the egg and his fragile ego, it may also symbolize the intellectual oppression he inflicts on others with his intolerant closed-mindedness.

Besides being a narcissist and a pedant, Humpty Dumpty appears ridiculous because he is a charlatan. Like many abrasive, vociferous authority figures, Humpty Dumpty is a pseudo-intellectual who makes numerous specious claims despite his obnoxious declarations of expertise. The egg professes, for instance, to be able to explain "...all poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven't been invented yet"

(239). The egg, as a symbol, represents the beginning stage of development before the acquisition of knowledge or experience, a being that essentially has “not been invented yet.” Humpty Dumpty’s statement therefore reiterates his need to assert himself onto everything, even existence itself. Consequently, this grandiose claim not only establishes his narcissism, but also demolishes his credibility as an intellectual. The egg’s first sign of intellectual incompetence, however, is likely his ignorance of the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme. While Humpty Dumpty acts as though he knows everything, he comically lacks the most elementary knowledge that all of Carroll’s readers are sure to have. His true imbecility is further revealed in his haughty challenge of Alice’s ability to perform a simple math equation without writing it down on paper. Moreover, when Alice proceeds to humor Humpty Dumpty by actually writing the equation down and presenting it to him, he ignorantly discloses his illiteracy by pretending to analyze the equation while holding the paper upside down (237). If his poorly masked illiteracy fails to solidify his idiocy, his preposterous definitions for words such as “glory” and “impenetrability” surely do. If Humpty Dumpty were portrayed as a creative revolutionary thinker, the seemingly random manner in which he assigns meaning to words might be inspiring. Because of his pedantry, however, his ludicrous definitions serve more to establish him as ridiculous and incompetent. Humpty Dumpty believes that meanings are fixed, but the fixed meaning of “glory” is hardly “a nice knockdown argument” (238). The egg is simply contradicting himself on a glorified power trip as the master of language. Furthermore, Humpty Dumpty’s rigid notion that meaning is fixed and interpretations are invariable is patently erroneous. According to contemporary communication theorists, language is subjective and fluid; meaning is the mutual creation of both people in any

given interaction (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988; Stamp, 1994). Humpty Dumpty simply craves the power to invent and control meaning and then to label it as fixed so that others must adhere to his rules.

Through Humpty Dumpty's obvious, laughable charlatanism, combined with his assumed authority, Carroll demonstrates to both Alice and the reader that individuals in power should not necessarily be respected and blindly followed. Like many authority figures, Humpty Dumpty is merely a power-hungry charlatan, unaware that the mistakes he inadvertently makes ultimately sabotage his fabricated intellectual image. More important than the harm that charlatanism can do to an authority figure's self-image, however, is the damage that it can inflict upon his/her followers when undetected or ignored. It is not simply that Humpty Dumpty is a charlatan that makes him dangerous, but rather the combination of his charlatanism and authoritarianism. The egg's ability to speak gobbledy-gook with conviction lends it credibility, despite its patent falseness. Because he is a narcissist and a pedant with an impressive lexicon and an authoritative manner, he is able to make Alice doubt what she knows and ultimately seek out and consider his specious, ridiculous propositions. Despite numerous glaring indications that Humpty Dumpty is intellectually incompetent, Alice believes that his ludicrous claim of expertise in decoding the meanings of all poems "sound[s] very hopeful" (239). As a result, Humpty Dumpty is able to convince her about the meaning of "Jabberwocky," destroying the immediacy of the poem.

Ironically, the nonsense in Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" comments logically on how we make sense of the world. This nonsense serves to educate us through presentations of new, and possibly

enlightening, ways of thinking about society. Contrarily, it also serves to exploit the truly nonsensical nature of dominant societal structures and thought processes. Carroll uses ridiculous characters, such as Humpty Dumpty, to satirize illogical phenomena in the “real” world that often pass as natural and unworthy of scrutiny. Because Humpty Dumpty is simultaneously constructed as a narcissist, a pedant, a charlatan, and an authority figure, Carroll succeeds in invalidating the notion of authority as necessarily beneficial. By the end of the chapter, both Alice and the reader acknowledge her exchange with Humpty Dumpty as tiresome and counterproductive. And as Alice declares with disgust, “Of all the unsatisfactory people I *ever* met—” she hears the sound of Humpty Dumpty’s ill-fated fall from his pedestal, “a heavy crash [that] shook the forest from end to end” (245).

### **Works Cited**

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