

Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* Explained

By Mary Hammond

Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* begins with a preface by the author in which he states, "If—and the thing is wildly possible—the charge of writing nonsense were ever brought against the author of this brief but instructive poem, it would be based, I feel convinced, on the line (in p. 16) Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes: In view of this painful possibility, I will not (as I might) appeal indignantly to my other writings as proof that I am incapable of such a deed: I will not (as I might) point to the strong moral purpose of this poem itself, to the arithmetical principles so cautiously inculcated in it, or to its noble teachings in Natural History—I will take the more prosaic course of simple explaining how it happened." Carroll then goes on to explain that in the course of removing the bowsprit once or twice a week to varnish it, the crew often had difficulty remembering which end of the ship it was meant to be re-affixed to, and they sometimes put it back onto the rudder end of the ship by mistake.

In this manner Lewis Carroll provides a completely sensical explanation of something which seems ridiculous on the face of it. This, along with his brief exposition on the helmsman's inability to correct the mistaken placement of the bowsprit (which occurs because of an addition the Bellman has made to Rule 42 of the Naval Code), provides a key to solving the mysteries of the *Snark*.

The critics of the age, who enjoyed Carroll most for the ways in which he appeared to set reason aside, disliked the feeling that they got from the *Snark* that there was an obvious lesson. They labeled the piece a failure, and consigned the discovery of "the allegory under which Mr. Carroll veiled

his secret wisdom” to a commentator of the future.¹ 141 years have passed since then. That future has arrived.

Like others of Carroll’s puzzles, more than half of the secret of discovering his meaning is to simply look. Like a Magic-Eye autostereogram, the overlaying pattern contains so much camouflaging “information” that you can’t imagine seeing through it, but if you look at it long enough, your brain will begin to pick up on the depth information encoded into the pattern, and you will suddenly “see” the hidden picture. In Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*, the hidden picture is an allegory on the dangers inherent in the pursuit of human ambitions; an allegory on sin and punishment. Carroll disguises his meaning with the use of playful nonsense words, and obscures the traditional figures of Christ and the Angel of Death behind a Baker and a Jubjub bird. This literary conceit allows Carroll to inculcate the proper sense of fear with which we should approach such a quest by avoiding the reflexive shut-off that the awareness of being confronted by such a weighty lesson would ordinarily bring about; especially in a child.

In *The Hunting of the Snark*, a group of living B-ings are sailing together on a journey which represents life. There is a Bellman, a Baker, a Beaver, a Banker, a Barrister, a Butcher, a Billiard Marker, a Bonnet Maker, a Broker, and the helmsman Boots. The bowsprit of their sailing ship often gets taken off and put back on the wrong end of the boat, making it difficult to tell right (starboard) from the opposite of right, larboard (or wrong)! This is the Bellman’s fault. He has added language to the Naval Code which has made it impossible for the helmsman to correct the crew when they put the bowsprit back on to the rudder end of the ship by mistake. Rule 42 of the

¹ The Spectator London: F.C. Westley v.49 1876 Jan-Jun, April 22, 1876, pp 527-528 review of *The Hunting of the Snark* [“We thought at one moment that we had it, fancying, doubtless in a crass mood, that Mr. Carroll had been weak enough to work out an idea, to try to extract his special fun, the fun outside reason, the fun of no sense, from the drama of human life.”]; The London Quarterly Review. London: H.J. Tresidder, vol 47 (Oct 1876-Jan 1877) pp 246-247 [*The Hunting of the Snark* judged readable, though not generally intelligible and altogether “too vague in its significance to be reckoned among works first-rate even in that secondary or tertiary class.” The reviewer suggests that what a Snark is will have to be left for time to discover, “if time will be concerned with such questions.”]

Naval Code had read, “No one shall speak to the Man at the Helm.” The Bellman caused problems when he added the language, “and the man at the Helm shall speak to no one.” After that, the helmsman could no longer correct the crew. During these “bewildering” intervals when the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder, the ship would usually sail backwards, and the helmsman could only stand by helplessly, in tears.

The Bible, that code which is meant to help its readers navigate through life, is represented in *The Hunting of the Snark* by the Naval Code. Lewis Carroll was a very religious man, a clergyman as well as a mathematician, logician, and writer, and *The Hunting of the Snark* is an allegory which Carroll crafted very carefully to deal with “religious difficulties” which he believed had come about because of human error introduced into the Bible. This error, specifically, was that the mistranslation of the word αἰών/aeon as eternal had made it difficult to follow the natural dictates of conscience in the interpretation of God’s laws, because it appeared to suggest that God, who Carroll believed to be perfectly good, could impose infinite punishment for finite sin. And Carroll could not accept that conclusion. In an essay he titled *Eternal Punishment*, Carroll characterized the difficulty which this introduction of human error had caused *in naval terms, citing specifically the difficulties it would cause in navigation*. He wrote, “To accept as a just and righteous act, the infliction on human beings of infinite punishment for finite sin, is virtually the abandonment of *Conscience* as a guide in questions of Right and Wrong, and the embarking, without compass or rudder, on a boundless ocean of perplexity.”²

² Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. The Lewis Carroll Picture Book: a Selection From the Unpublished Writings And Drawings of Lewis Carroll : Together With Reprints From Scarce And Unacknowledged Work. London: T.F. Unwin, 1899, pp 345-355. [Carroll’s essay *Eternal Punishment* was intended for inclusion in a planned but never published book on religious difficulties. It reads in part, “All he needs here to be told is that the interpretation of the passages, which are believed to teach the doctrine of “Eternal Punishment,” depends largely, if not entirely, on the meaning given to one single word (αἰών). This is rendered, in our English Bibles, by the word “eternal” or “everlasting” : but there are many critics who believe that it does not necessarily mean “endless.” If this be so, then the punishment, which we are considering, is finite punishment for finite sin, and the original difficulty no

The hapless beings sailing on Lewis Carroll's "boundless ocean of perplexity" are on a snark hunt. A snark hunt is an allegory on temptation and sin, and the word snark is likely a portmanteau word combining the words snake and shark; a transposition of snake, the symbol for sin in the Garden of Eden, with that of shark, a symbol for danger at sea, as the sea is the setting in which this particular tale takes place.

There is a man on board the ship who will try to warn his fellow passengers about the dangers of the snark. He is a baker who only bakes bride cakes (representing love), he has three pairs of boots (representing the holy trinity), and his fellow passengers don't know his name because, although he has told them his name before, he did so in Hebrew, Greek, Dutch and German (versions of the Bible), and they had not understood. He is the son of a poor but honest man and woman, and he left behind 42 crates on the shore with his name on them before embarking on his journey. The Baker represents Christ, and his voyage will end with a moment of transcendent glory on the mount when he takes on, and dies for, our sins. The 42 crates with his name on them, which he has left on the shore, symbolize the 42 generations from Abraham to the birth of Jesus which are detailed in the Bible in the Gospel of Matthew (generations being those things which are left behind you when you set off on your voyage on the sea of life).

Discussion of the use and symbolism of the number 42 in the Bible was widespread during Lewis Carroll's lifetime. A version of the New Testament published in London in 1862 included statements that "the sixth seventh brings us to Christ," as well as "the number forty-two signifying in Scripture a time of trial leading to rest."³ A popular mnemonic poem of the time intended for bible study read as follows:

The generations from Abraham, to David are fourteen,

longer exists.]

³ The New Testament of Our Lord And Saviour Jesus Christ, In the Original Greek. New ed. London: Rivington, vol 1 1862, p 5.

And from David unto Babylon, is a like division seen,
And from Babylon unto Jesus, the same again we view,
Three times fourteen generations, makes the number forty-two.⁴

Snarks are described as having a hollow and fleeting taste, being unnourishing, wasting time that could be better spent, taking themselves too seriously, and being both vain and ambitious. Hunting the snark represents the senseless pursuit of worldly ambitions; a pursuit that can be dangerous to the soul. The Banker, for example, is taken by the Bandersnatch.

It's hard for a rich man to avoid damnation.

The narrow, dark valley that the Beaver and Butcher venture into symbolizes the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Here, they are frightened by the sound of the Jubjub bird, which, when you "hear" it approaching makes you recall your childhood (and reflect on your life). The Jubjub bird acts as the Angel of Death. Its name is a likely reference to a lesser gospel known as the Book of Jubilees, which is abbreviated as Jub., and which describes the four classes of angels who interact with man, including one which presides over the phenomena of nature and natural processes (such as death). The Jubjub bird is described as living in perpetual passion (the Latin *passionem* means "suffering"), and it is a creature who collects but cannot be bribed. (As in "All your money won't another minute buy." *Dust in the Wind*.) But all is not lost, there is relief in death when heaven is the reward. The Butcher and the Beaver (natural enemies in life, as the butcher could only kill beavers) become close friends after death. They are the wolf and the lamb of Isaiah 11:6,7, which reads, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them."

The Barrister dreams about attempting to prosecute a pig for deserting its sty. The trial is a pointless farce as the pig has been dead for years! The

⁴ Eisenbeis, Louis, 1835-. The Amen Corner, And Other Poems. West Chester, Pa.: F. S. Hickman, 1897, p 290 [excerpt of poem titled *Matthew-First Chapter*]

Barrister's farcical dream, symbolizes the meaninglessness of man's laws in contrast to those of God.

The Hunting of the Snark reaches its climax when, as the day is waning and night approaches, the voyagers see their Baker, "their hero unnamed— On the top of a neighboring crag, Erect and sublime, for one moment of time." As the Baker vanishes into a chasm, he calls out to his fellow voyagers, to tell them that the snark they were pursuing was a boojum. This passage has been nearly universally interpreted as suggesting that this particular snark was one which was more dangerous than most. I, however, believe the meaning of boojum to be something quite different. The scene, as I interpret it, is a reference to Christ's crucifixion, that moment in which Christ as the Baker, meets with the snark, atones for our sins, and "vanishes" from life.

Carroll initially breaks the word boojum down into two parts, boo, and something which "sounded like" jum, but which may have been "only a breeze that went by," so that the story literally includes a Boo! moment. ("It's a Boo—" Then silence.)

Carroll believed that God used fear to motivate good behavior in those who were not yet morally advanced enough to reject sin based on the love of goodness, and *The Hunting of the Snark* was a story which was meant to be read aloud. Thus, his "snark was a boojum" closing scene works on three different levels. First and most charmingly, he has written in a Boo! to make little girls startle and laugh when the story was read to them aloud, and secondly, he has conveyed the relationship between the snark and fear. This is the relationship between sin and the fear of punishment. And yet, Carroll's understanding of sin and fear was much more complex than one which could be read only as *be afraid, sin will be punished*. While Carroll believed that there was "some eternal *necessity*, wholly beyond our comprehension, that *sin* must result in suffering," and that this principle was in some way hidden in "the unfathomable mystery of the Atonement," he could *not* believe that this requirement extended to the infliction of infinite punishment for finite

sin. The way Carroll came to this conclusion was, in a fashion ever so typical of Carroll, by simplifying the difficulty into three propositions: I) God is perfectly good, II) To inflict Eternal Punishment on certain human beings, and in certain circumstances, would be wrong, and III) God is capable of acting thus. Once Carroll had this difficulty reduced to logical form, he performed a logical analysis by which he reasoned that the third proposition, *God is capable of acting thus*, was untrue.⁵

The form of logic which Carroll used in his analysis was one which was developed by a mathematician and logician by the name of George Boole. Boole lived from 1815 to 1864, and his novel mathematical theories of logic⁶ figured very prominently in Carroll's books on logic, *The Game of Logic*, *Curiosa Mathematica*, and *Symbolic Logic, Part I*.⁷ Boolean logic is a form of algebra based on simplified truth variables, and as such it has been tremendously useful in forming the basis of modern computers and thinking machines. Interestingly, a search of Boolean logic often reveals Lewis Carroll's name, as he is recognized as having performed important early work in this field.

I believe that Boolean logic also figured prominently in *The Hunting of the Snark* (which Carroll published twelve years after Boole's death), that the "boo" in boojum stands for Boolean logic, and that the "jum" in boojum stands for jumble, more specifically, the jumble of syllogisms regarding God and punishment that the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) decried must be worked into a less jumbled state. "I must beg pardon for calling it jumble," Locke wrote, "till some body shall put these ideas into so many

5 Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. The Lewis Carroll Picture Book: a Selection From the Unpublished Writings And Drawings of Lewis Carroll : Together With Reprints From Scarce And Unacknowledged Work. London: T.F. Unwin, 1899, pp 345-355. [Carroll's essay *Eternal Punishment*.]

6 Boole, George, 1815-1864. An Investigation of the Laws of Thought: On Which Are Founded the Mathematical Theories of Logic And Probabilities. London: Walton and Maberly, 1854.

7 Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. The Game of Logic. London: Macmillan and Co., 1887; Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. Curiosa Mathematica. London: Macmillan & Co., 1894; Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. Symbolic Logic: Part I, Elementary. London: Macmillan, 1896.

syllogisms, and then say, that they are less jumbled, and their connexion more visible..."⁸ Is that not what Carroll believed he had done in his Essay on Eternal Punishment? John Locke was considered to be the Christ Church representative of English philosophers,⁹ and a marble statue of the great philosopher stands in the library of Christ Church in Oxford, where both men were educated, and where Carroll worked as a mathematical lecturer (under his real name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Locke had stated in his essay that philosophers might try to reason through these syllogisms, but that in general, "men in their own inquiries after truth never use syllogisms to convince themselves [or in teaching others to instruct willing learners.]" I have little doubt that Carroll had some amount of pride in his attempt to teach all men how to use logical syllogisms in their own pursuit of truth, and that he was aware of himself as *that* man, that "*some body*" whom Locke had implied must come along to make these logical connections more visible before the reasoning underlying God and Punishment should cease to be called a jumble. In logical terms therefore, taking Carroll's closing line in *The Hunting of the Snark*, "for the snark was a boojum, you see," let snark = sin meriting infinite punishment, and let boojum = logical syllogisms jumbled to the point that it was not clear that one or more of the propositions forming "snark" was false.

I have proposed that *The Hunting of the Snark* is an allegory in which Lewis Carroll presents his beliefs that human error introduced into the Bible had caused tremendous religious difficulties because it forced the understanding that God could impose infinite punishment for finite sin. There are, however, other paths by which a researcher can reach the

⁸ Locke, John, 1632-1704. *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding: In Four Books*. 5. ed. London: Awnsham & J. Churchill, 1706, Book IV Of Knowledge and Opinion, Chapter XVII Of Reason, pp. 569-571.

⁹ Thompson, Henry Lewis, 1840-1905. *Christ Church*. London: F. E. Robinson and Co., 1900, p 222 ["John Locke is the Christ Church representative of English philosophers."]

conclusion that the concept of eternal punishment is at the heart of *The Hunting of the Snark*.

Goetz Kluge of Munich, for example, has proposed that the 42 boxes the Baker left on the shore were a reference to Thomas Cranmer's 42 Articles of Religion, which were drafted in 1552 during the reign of Henry VIII's short-lived son, Edward VI. In Kluge's view, Carroll used Rule 42 of the Naval Code pondered by the Bellman to describe a total disconnect from God as a consequence of the 42nd of Cranmer's 42 Articles, which states: "All men shall not be saved at the length. They also are worthy of condemnation, who endeavour at this time to restore the dangerous opinion that all men, be they never so ungodly, shall at length be saved, when they have suffered pains for their sins a certain time appointed by God's justice."¹⁰ Kluge's theories can be found at his blog *The Hunting of the Snark* at www.snrk.de and his theories on the relevance of Carroll's use of the number 42 at www.snrk.de/category/rethinking-the-snark/42.

I personally had not been exposed to Cranmer's 42 Articles before I reached my conclusions set forth in this article. My research consisted wholly of Carroll's work, both *The Hunting of the Snark*, and his essay *Eternal Punishment*, and statements taken from biblical analysis predating Carroll's work which suggested that the number 42 was relevant both as the number of generations preceding Christ, and as symbolizing life as a time of trial leading to eternal salvation. This fit well with an allegory which dealt with the concepts of sin and punishment. However, Kluge's path to theorizing that the concept of eternal punishment is at the heart of *The Hunting of the Snark* is also very compelling. How is it that both Kluge and I were able to apply such apparently dissonant interpretations to reach such a similar end result? The inescapable conclusion is that Carroll was referencing Cranmer's Article 42 with his Rule 42, especially as the concept of eternal punishment

¹⁰ Cranmer's Article 42 had a short lived reign. The Articles, which were an attempt to codify the essential beliefs of the Anglican Church, were quickly overturned during the reversion to Roman Catholicism under Mary I, and Article 42 did not make it into the 39 Articles which were codified in 1571 during the reign of Elizabeth I.

upheld by Article 42 *is the conclusion forced by the translation of the word αἰών/aeon as eternal*. It was simply one more signpost in a poem riddled with allusions and clues. It is also worth noting that Cranmer's Article 42, had it ever been codified, would have provided the basis *for condemning Lewis Carroll himself*. As a clergyman and scholar, there is little doubt that Carroll would have been aware of this irony. Was it this awareness then, which led him to shroud his meaning so completely?

There are many allusions in the Snark which remain to be uncovered. "Its noble teachings in Natural History" are, on their face, indicators of mortality supporting the voyage of life allegory. Kluge, however, has done very good work tying these references to Darwinism and its impact on man's relationship to God. (Again, because Lewis Carroll was so adept at layering in multiple meanings, both interpretations work towards the same conclusion.) There also remains the Beaver's math, the repeated use of the prime 17, a more complete analysis of the rule of three, and the *raison d'être* of the more minor characters. My favorite part of *The Hunting of the Snark* is the riddle of the identity of the Bonnetmaker. He appears in the story in one line only, which is as follows:

The maker of bonnets ferociously planned a novel arrangement of bows.

This is a riddle which, like so many other of Carroll's riddles, is based on the ambiguous meaning of words. Because the Bonnetmaker makes bonnets, which are largely decorative, the meaning of bows is understood in that context.¹¹ In fact, the rhyme which follows this line—while the Billiard-marker with quivering hand was chalking the tip of his nose—forces that understanding as in line with the rhyme (i.e., bows/nose rather than bows/cows). And yet, a bow (pronounced like cow), figures prominently in *The Hunting of the Snark* as that part of the ship (the front end of the ship) upon which the bowsprit is supposed to be placed. And, most notably, the

¹¹ Yet another facet: a bow, as it is understood in this line when taken at face value, is something which is looped and knotted. This is notable as Lewis Carroll called his logic problems knots.

bow is the part of the ship which in an unusual and strikingly *novel* fashion, is sometimes mixed up with the rudder end of the ship. For that matter, the word “novel” has its own ambiguous meaning. It can mean new and inventive, as it appears to do here, and it can also mean a work of fictional prose. Based on the foregoing, it is my opinion that Carroll is representing himself here in cameo as the maker of Bonnets and Hoods. I was helped along in reaching this conclusion by my longstanding belief that Carroll also represented himself as the Hatter in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. This is something which Carroll’s nephew Stuart Dodgson Collingwood implied when he insisted after his uncle’s death that someone who ate at his uncle’s undergraduate dining table (a group of roughly six) still lived on in *Alice* as the Hatter. Scholars have largely overlooked the obvious, that Carroll himself ate at his own dining table.¹² And,.. what else is a maker of bonnets, but a hatter?

After Carroll wrote the *Snark* he disavowed that he had meant anything by it. As, for example, in the following statement he made in a letter to a friend:

As to the meaning of the Snark, I’m very much afraid I didn’t mean anything but nonsense! Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer means. So whatever good meanings are in the book, I’m glad to accept as the meaning of the book. The best that I’ve seen is by a lady (she published it in a letter to a newspaper), that the whole book is an allegory on the search after happiness.¹³

By this point Carroll had suffered much at the hands of his critics for over-moralizing (particularly in his *Sylvie and Bruno* books), and yet, he remained

12 Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson, 1870-. [The Life And Letters of Lewis Carroll \(Rev. C.L. Dodgson\)](#). New York: The Century Co., 1899. P 47 [“In Mr. Dodgson’s mess were Philip Pusey, the late Rev. G. C. Woodhouse, and, among others, one who still lives in “Alice in Wonderland” as the “Hatter.””]

13 Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson, 1870-. [The Life And Letters of Lewis Carroll \(Rev. C.L. Dodgson\)](#). New York: The Century Co., 1899, p 173.

a scrupulously honest man, and so we must assume that the above statement was truthful. We do not, however, need to assume that the meaning we first take from it is the only interpretation it may have. It would, in fact, be naïve to approach Carroll's statement in that way. According to the Hon. Lionel A. Tollemache, who knew Carroll from Oxford, Carroll would suggest that "if a dull writer sent you a copy of his books, you should at once write and thank him, and should add, with Delphic ambiguity, that you will *lose* no time in perusing them!"¹⁴) Similarly, perhaps, his use of the word *afraid* may have been one used to intentionally obscure while holding fast to the literal truth. Reading the statement for intentional ambiguity opens it up to more than one interpretation. The meaning could possibly have been something along the lines of, "I meant to impart something important, but I'm *afraid* that I didn't achieve anything but nonsense." This is in fact the only way to square his later disavowals with his insistence in *The Hunting of the Snark* that he had carefully plotted meaning into the work. Either that, or the other way around, and it is the *Snark's* preface which should be examined for Delphic ambiguity. Bowsprit fore, or aft.

Carroll's statement judging one of the meanings his readers had offered as "best" suggests that there was in fact an intended meaning that he was aware of. That "best" claim, the claim which most closely approached Carroll's intended meaning, was that the *Snark* was "an allegory on the search after happiness." The proof of the meaning of *The Hunting of the Snark* is in the completeness of the fit. It is an allegory on the *dangers* inherent in the pursuit of happiness, and ultimately, on man's understanding of the nature of God.

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¹⁴ Tollemache, L. A. 1838-1919. (1908). *Old and odd memories*. London: Edward Arnold, p 311.