Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There

Lewis Carroll · *1871 (dated 1872) · original English text*

Alice steps through the mirror into a chessboard country and is promised a queen's crown if she can reach the Eighth Square. The journey is a game with talking flowers, twins, a knight, and a banquet that collapses. She wakes to ask which of them dreamed it.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If words, memory, and even a crown can be made to mean whatever the speaker chooses, what still holds when Alice reaches the Eighth Square?

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Humpty Dumpty · Chapter VI, Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty claims mastery over words; the Red Queen claims that here you must run merely to stay in place. Alice still goes on, learns the chess-moves of kindness and courage, and becomes a queen. The crown does not make the banquet just, and she ends by shaking the Red Queen into a kitten. The last poem asks, "Life, what is it but a dream?"

KEY CHARACTERS

Alice
Now a little older; she wants to be a queen and still insists on sense.

The Red Queen
Severe, fast, and exacting; she sets the chess-route and the running rule.

The White Queen
Gentle, disordered, and able to believe impossible things before breakfast.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Fat twins who recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter" and nearly fight over a rattle.

Humpty Dumpty
A proud egg on a wall who claims to be master of words.

The White Knight
A kind inventor whose inventions fail; he is the gentlest help Alice receives.

The Lion and the Unicorn
They fight for the crown, as in the nursery rhyme, and are not satisfied with plum-cake.

WORDS AND A CROWN

> *"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."*
> **Humpty Dumpty** · Chapter VI

> *"Life, what is it but a dream?"*
> Closing poem, "Which Dreamed it?"

Grades 3–5
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Looking-Glass House

CHAPTERS I–II

Alice passes through the mirror, finds a living chessboard, and is told by the Red Queen how to reach the Eighth Square and be a queen.

- Chessmen walk and talk in the looking-glass room; the White Queen's shawl blows into the garden.
- The garden flowers speak, and a path that should go forward keeps bringing Alice back.
- The Red Queen gives her a dry biscuit and the route across the board.

02

Insects, and a Walrus

CHAPTERS III–IV

A railway carriage and talking insects give way to Tweedledum and Tweedledee, who recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter."

- The gnat talks Alice through a wood where insects have looking-glass names.
- The twins will fight over a rattle, though they would rather not.
- The Walrus and Carpenter lead the oysters out for a walk and eat them.

> *"The time has come,' the Walrus said, / 'To talk of many things:"*
> **Tweedledee, reciting** · Chapter IV, Tweedledum And Tweedledee

03

Wool, Water, and a Word

CHAPTERS V–VI

The White Queen becomes a sheep in a shop that turns into a river; Humpty Dumpty sits on a wall and explains "Jabberwocky" by making words mean what he chooses.

- Alice helps the White Queen, who lives backwards and remembers best what has not happened yet.
- The shop's egg becomes Humpty Dumpty on his wall.
- He glosses "Jabberwocky" and boasts that a word means what he chooses.

> *"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards"*
> **the White Queen** · Chapter V, Wool and Water

04

Lion, Unicorn, and Knight

CHAPTERS VII–VIII

The Lion and the Unicorn fight for the crown. The White Knight, full of inventions that do not work, sees Alice to the last brook.

- The king's messengers, Haigha and Hatta, bring news of the fight.
- The White Knight falls off his horse with comic regularity and means well.
- He sings Alice a song of his own invention as they part.

05

Queen Alice, and Waking

CHAPTERS IX–XII

Alice is crowned, examined by two queens, and seated at a banquet that breaks into chaos. She shakes the Red Queen and wakes, a black kitten in her hands.

- Queens test her on sums and manners that will not stay fair.
- The feast will not be eaten; the pudding is introduced and takes offense.
- The closing poem asks whether life is only a dream, and which of them dreamed it.

> *"it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."*
> **the Red Queen** · Chapter II, The Garden of Live Flowers (the running rule Alice carries through the book)

Words and Meaning | A Goal Across the Board | Kindness on the Way | Memory | Dream and Waking

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 3–5

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #12. Chapter VIII is titled "It's my own Invention."
2. The Red Queen's running rule is: "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." In this text "here" and "you" are emphasized.
3. Humpty Dumpty's claim is "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less," not a later shortened proverb alone.
4. "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is set in single quotation marks in this edition, as a poem recited by Tweedledee.
5. The last line, "Life, what is it but a dream?", is from the closing poem, not from Alice's spoken dialogue in the banquet.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #12, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/through-the-looking-glass/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.