GENERAL

# the walrus and the carpenter by lewis carroll

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

## Introduction

**The Walrus and the Carpenter** by Lewis Carroll is one of the most celebrated poems in *Through the Looking Glass*, the sequel to the beloved *Alice in Wonderland*. Though it is often presented as a whimsical, child friendly verse, the poem contains layers of meaning that have fascinated scholars, educators, and literary enthusiasts for over a century. This article delves into the poem's historical background, structural intricacies, thematic depth, and lasting cultural impact. Whether you are a student preparing a paper, a teacher designing a lesson plan, or simply a curious reader, you will find a comprehensive guide that balances accessible language with scholarly insight.

## Historical Context

### Lewis Carroll's Life and Literary Vision

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known by his pen name Lewis Carroll, was born in 1832 in Daresbury, England. A mathematician, logician, and photographer, Carroll's fascination with logic and wordplay is evident in all his works. His most enduring contributions to literature—*Alice"s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)—reveal a playful yet profound exploration of language, reality, and authority. **The Walrus and the Carpenter** fits neatly into this canon, serving both as a lyrical diversion and a vehicle for Carroll's subtle critique of social structures.

### Publication of Through the Looking Glass

Published in 1871, *Through the Looking Glass* is a mirror image retelling of Alice's journey into a fantastical realm. The book combines prose chapters with poems, each contributing to the narrative's rhythm and thematic tapestry. The poem that bears the same name as the poem's most famous characters—"The Walrus and the Carpenter"—appears in Chapter Four, "The Garden of Live Flowers." It is written in a jaunty, rhymed style that invites children while challenging adults to read between the lines.

## The Poem: "The Walrus and the Carpenter"

### Textual Snapshot

Below is a brief excerpt that captures the poem's playful tone and underlying menace:

"The sun was shining on the sea,
The sea was very deep,
The sea was very, very deep,
The sea was very deep, and very deep."

### Structure and Form

Carroll's poem is written in a consistent AABB rhyme scheme, with each stanza comprising four lines of iambic tetrameter. The rhythmic regularity creates an almost lullaby-like quality that contrasts sharply with the poem's grim narrative. The repetition of key phrases—such as "the sea was very deep"—reinforces the sense of inevitability and the inexorable pull of fate. Carroll's use of a simple, almost childlike meter masks the poem's darker undertones, a technique that has long been praised for its ingenuity.

## Themes and Motifs

### Deception and Manipulation

The walrus and the carpenter employ a cunning strategy to lure the unsuspecting sea squirrels. Their persuasive rhetoric—“We have a very good reason for asking you to stay with us for a while”—exemplifies the deceptive tactics often employed by those in positions of power. This theme resonates with modern audiences, reminding us of the ways authority can be used to exploit the vulnerable.

### Exploitation of the Innocent

Carroll’s portrayal of the sea squirrels as naïve, trusting creatures highlights the tragedy of innocence corrupted. The poem’s final stanza—where the squirrels are eaten—serves as a stark reminder that even the most innocent can become prey when faced with cunning manipulation. This motif has been compared to classic cautionary tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.”

### The Nature of Authority

Through the characters of the walrus and the carpenter, Carroll interrogates the legitimacy of authority figures. The walrus, often seen as a symbol of wisdom, and the carpenter, a figure of craftsmanship, both wield power to control the squirrels. Their partnership illustrates how combined authority can be especially dangerous.

### The Role of the Sea

The sea acts as a backdrop and a character in its own right. Its depth and mystery parallel the unknown risks that the squirrels face. Additionally, the sea’s vastness underscores the isolation and helplessness of the squirrels, amplifying the poem’s emotional impact.

## Characters Analysis

### The Walrus

In literary criticism, the walrus often embodies the archetype of the charismatic leader. He speaks in a calm, persuasive tone, using repetition to reinforce his message. His role as a manipulator is further underscored by his willingness to sacrifice the squirrels for his own amusement.

### The Carpenter

The carpenter’s role is more ambiguous. While he shares the walrus’s manipulative intentions, he also demonstrates a sense of practicality. His willingness to “build a house” for the squirrels—only to later consume them—creates a paradox that invites debate over moral responsibility.

### The Squirrels

Representing innocence, the squirrels are portrayed as eager, curious, and trusting. Their repeated request for the walrus and carpenter’s guidance reflects a naive hope that authority will protect them. Their eventual fate serves as a cautionary conclusion to the poem’s moral lesson.

### The Seagull

While often overlooked, the seagull’s presence adds an additional layer of commentary. The seagull’s question—“Who will eat them?”—highlights the community’s awareness of the danger, yet no one intervenes. This silence underscores the theme of collective responsibility.

## Symbolism and Allegory

### The Walrus as Authority

Carroll's choice of a walrus—a creature often associated with wisdom and strength—serves as a symbol of authority. By portraying the walrus as deceptive, Carroll critiques the misuse of wisdom for personal gain.

### The Carpenter as Moral Ambiguity

The carpenter's dual role as builder and predator symbolizes the duality of human nature. He creates a shelter for the squirrels but ultimately destroys them, reflecting how human ingenuity can both protect and harm.

### The Squirrels as Victims

The squirrels' vulnerability and eventual demise represent the plight of the oppressed or marginalized. Their tragic end invites readers to question societal structures that allow such exploitation.

### The Sea as Society

The sea's endless expanse and unpredictable currents can be read as an allegory for society at large. The squirrels' inability to navigate the sea's depths mirrors the challenges faced by those who lack knowledge or agency.

## Literary Devices

### Rhyme Scheme and Meter

Carroll's AABB rhyme scheme and iambic tetrameter create a musicality that lures readers into a false sense of safety. The rhythmic pattern also serves to emphasize key lines, ensuring that the poem's moral message resonates.

### Personification

By giving the sea human-like qualities—"the sea was very deep" repeated as if speaking—Carroll imbues the environment with agency, thereby enhancing the narrative's tension.

### Irony

Irony permeates the poem. The walrus and carpenter's promise of safety is inverted when they consume the very creatures they claim to protect. This dramatic irony heightens the poem's emotional impact.

### Repetition

Repetition of phrases such as "the sea was very deep" underscores the inevitability of the squirrels' fate. It also mirrors the way manipulative rhetoric can become repetitive, reinforcing its persuasive power.

## Reception and Criticism

### Contemporary Reviews

At the time of its publication, critics praised Carroll's clever use of rhyme and his ability to subvert expectations. The poem was seen as a delightful addition to the whimsical tone of *Through the Looking Glass* Some reviewers, however, felt the moral was too subtle for young readers.

### Modern Interpretations

Today, scholars often view the poem through lenses of post colonial theory, feminist critique, and psychoanalytic readings. The walrus's manipulation is sometimes read as an allegory for colonial power, while the carpenter's ambiguous morality invites feminist discussions about agency and exploitation.

## Adaptations and Cultural Impact

### Film and Television

- Disney’s 1989 adaptation of Through the Looking  Glass features a stylized rendition of the poem, though it simplifies the darker undertones.
- BBC’s 1999 Alice in Wonderland series presents the poem in a more faithful, eerie tone.

### Music and Opera

- Composer John Tavener set the poem to music in his 1997 Walrus composition, exploring its haunting qualities.
- Opera adaptations by Thomas Adès incorporate the poem’s rhythm into the libretto, emphasizing its lyrical nature.

### Visual Arts

- Artist James Gurney painted a series of illustrations for the poem, capturing both its whimsical and ominous aspects.
- Graphic novel adaptations in the early 2000s reimagined the poem’s narrative for modern audiences.

## Teaching the Poem

### Classroom Strategies

1. Start with a read  aloud to capture the poem’s musicality.
2. Analyze the rhyme scheme and meter in a group discussion.


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