

# Carroll's Glory - Part One

One topic I'd hoped to get to in Engl 170-01 yesterday is this exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty:

*"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.*

*Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"*

*"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.*

*"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."*

*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."*

*"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."*

Maybe it's just as well that we didn't get to this in class. The issues I wanted to discuss through Alice and Humpty Dumpty would have taken a lot of time to address. Maybe blogging is the better way to go. In fact, this is going to take more than one post. Watch for the sequel.

The question raised by the Alice-Humpty exchange — *What's the relationship between mind and meaning?* — looms large in the theoretical conversation that runs continuously behind the practice of criticism.

Sarah Rusnak's September 10 post on [The Power of a Word](#) gave rise to some extremely thoughtful comments on this question from [Eric](#), [Meghan](#), and [Brandon](#). Let's consider, for a moment, Eric's suggestion that words

*... really mean different things to each person respectively. The word plum may mean a lot more to an ardent fan of plums versus someone, like me, who has never once bitten into one. I think the same goes for words like 'love', 'happiness', 'garbage'; they all mean something drastically different and unique for each person.*

Eric here is in territory similar to that which Sarah more recently explores in a [comment](#) on Michael's post, [The Importance of Perception](#). Sarah writes,

*According to recent scientific studies, we all have our own ways of seeing the same thing. Take, for instance, looking at different colors. Though we all recognize something deemed "blue" by society as "blue", are we actually seeing the same shade of hue when we look at a so-called "blue" object? Scientists in the UK (link below), claim that our sensory perceptions are controlled by neurons that are not predetermined. In other words, we all have a distinct, individual shade of color in mind when we hear the word "blue".*

She then goes on to wonder, "if the same principle applies to literature. An author, artist, etc. has a specific idea in mind when creating their work. Yet even though this idea may be articulated to us through comments in the margins, research into the creator's life, or even by the creator himself, do we perceive something just a bit differently when we look at the same work?"

Let me try my hand at summarizing the problem as Eric and Sarah have posed it.

Basically, we have a mind on either side of an object. The object is a physical entity that reflects light from the part of the spectrum roughly designated as "blue," or a word, or a work of literature. There's a mind on either side of it. In the latter two cases, one mind speaks the word or writes the work, the other mind hears the word or reads the work.

MIND — OBJECT — MIND

So, the problem: Are the latter two cases parallel to the first one? Are two readers of a poem like two people looking at a "blue" square on a wall, undergoing slightly or perhaps even "drastically" (Eric's word) subjective experiences as a result of their different neuronal wiring or past experiences (for example, of eating plums)?

If we suppose that the cases *are* parallel, then there would seem to be two options for criticism:

1. Make every effort, as a critic, to line up your subjective experience with that of the writer. Try to figure out *what the words meant to him or her*.
2. Decide that (1) is impossible, and simply describe what the words *mean to you*.

Critics who follow the first path will find themselves on a quest towards the "right" interpretation of a poem. Critics who follow the second are likely to say — as many non-critical readers say — "Since we all experience the meaning of words differently, there can't be a 'right' interpretation." It's easy to see how the second option might lead you to doubt the value of practicing criticism at all. If there's only *my meaning of the poem, your meaning of the poem, and her meaning of the poem*, if we're not talking about the same thing, why bother talking at all?

But what if the cases aren't parallel? How does that change the options for criticism?

The Alice-Humpty exchange shows why the cases are, in fact, different, and why critical options 1 and 2 therefore present a false choice. As I'll explain in the next post.