

Pure Form

In case you want to watch it again (and again, and again), here's the video we briefly discussed in class today:

As I said in that discussion, this is a great video to watch whenever you're trying to remind yourself what *form* means — in the most basic sense, anyway — in the lexicon of literary criticism.

The twins don't know any words yet, so their conversation is (almost) devoid of meaning. For just that reason, though, their talk helps reveal *the form of conversation*. Two of the things we noted that this form involves are (1) turn-taking and (2) expressive gestures. The twins also understand some basic things about the form of the individual speech utterances that make up a conversation. Although they use no words, their strings of nonsense syllables sound like sentences and display the rhythms of sentence-speech. They know that there's a kind of sentence that ends with a rising intonation — even though they don't yet know (presumably) that the purpose of this kind of sentence — of articulating words in this particular form — is to signal that the sentence is a question.

Here are two other examples — both famous — of form-revealing utterance. The first is the linguist Noam Chomsky's "nonsense" sentence

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

The sentence has no meaning, yet we recognize it as "English." Why? Because it has the form of a sentence in English. By contrast,

**Green furiously sleep ideas colorless.*

does not. (Linguists typically place an asterisk in front of sentences that are not in the acceptable form of a given language--- "acceptable form" meaning nothing more or less than the form that speakers of that language recognize and use.)

The second example is from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. It's the poem "Jabberwocky."

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

*'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!*

*He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.*

*And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!*

*One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.*

*'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
He chortled in his joy.*

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Carroll's poem has not only the form of English syntax but many formal features specific to poetry (such as stanzas, meter, and rhyme). Yet it doesn't mean a thing.

Or does it? Alice will learn that Humpty Dumpty is quite prepared to analyze this poem as though he were a literary critic.

We'll look at his analysis later this semester.