

Lewis Carroll on Inspiration and Originality



“Metaphorically, Carroll positioned Alice as the Sacred Pilgrim. He cast her, in some sense, as Persephone, goddess of the underworld. Like his literary ancestors, Carroll utilized skillful applications of allegory in order to create adventures that paralleled Persephone’s quest and pointed to the central theme around which the Eleusian initiations were organized. The symbolism implicit in Alice and Looking Glass suggest that Carroll, like so many other writers of his period, used allegory as a delivery mechanism for higher spiritual teachings.”

*– Sherry L Ackerman
Behind the Looking Glass*

It was in 1874, I believe, that the idea first occurred to me of making [it] the nucleus of a longer story. As the years went on, I jotted down, at odd moments, all sorts of odd ideas, and fragments of dialogue, that occurred to me--who knows how?--with a transitory suddenness that left me no choice but either to record them then and there, or to abandon them to oblivion. Sometimes one could trace to their source these random flashes of thought--as being suggested by the book one was reading, or struck out from the 'flint' of one's own mind by the 'steel' of a friend's chance remark but they had also a way of their own, of occurring, a propos of nothing--specimens of that hopelessly illogical phenomenon, 'an effect without a cause.' Such, for example, was the last line of *The*

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Hunting of the Snark, which came into my head (as I have already related in 'The Theatre' for April, 1887) quite suddenly, during a solitary walk: and such, again, have been passages which occurred in dreams, and which I cannot trace to any antecedent cause whatever.

And thus it came to pass that I found myself at last in possession of a huge unwieldy mass of literature--if the reader will kindly excuse the spelling--which only needed stringing together, upon the thread of a consecutive story, to constitute the book I hoped to write. Only! The task, at first, seemed absolutely hopeless, and gave me a far clearer idea, than I ever had before, of the meaning of the word 'chaos'.

And I think it must have been ten years, or more, before I had succeeded in classifying these odds-and-ends sufficiently to see what sort of a story they indicated: for the story had to grow out of the incidents, not the incidents out of the story. I am telling all this, in no spirit of egoism, but because I really believe that some of my readers will be interested

in these details of the 'genesis' of a book, which looks so simple and straight-forward a matter, when completed, that they might suppose it to have been written straight off, page by page, as one would write a letter, beginning at the beginning; and ending at the end.

It is, no doubt, possible to write a story in that way: and, if it be not vanity to say so, I believe that I could, myself,--if I were in the unfortunate position (for I do hold it to be a real misfortune) of being obliged to produce a given amount of fiction in a given time,--that I could 'fulfill my task,' and produce my 'tale of bricks,' as other slaves have done. One thing, at any rate, I could guarantee as to the story so produced--that it should be utterly commonplace, should contain no new ideas whatever, and should be very weary reading!

This species of literature has received the very appropriate name of 'padding' which might fitly be defined as 'that which all can write and none can read.' That the present volume contains no such writing I dare not avow: sometimes, in order to bring a picture into its proper place, it has been necessary to eke out a page with two or three extra lines: but I can honestly say I have put in no more than I was absolutely compelled to do.

Perhaps the hardest thing in all literature--at least I have found it so: by no voluntary effort can I accomplish it: I have to take it as it comes--is to write anything original. And perhaps the easiest is, when once an original line has been struck out, to follow it up, and to write any amount more to the same tune.

I do not know if 'Alice in Wonderland' was an original story--I was, at least, no conscious imitator in writing it--but I do know that, since it came out, something like a dozen story-books have appeared, on identically the same pattern. The path I timidly explored believing myself to be 'the first that ever burst into that silent sea'-- is now a beaten high-road: all the way-side flowers have long ago been trampled into the dust: and it would be courting disaster for me to attempt that style again.

Hence it is that, in *Sylvie and Bruno*, I have striven with I know not what success to strike out yet another new path: be it bad or good, it is the best I can do. It is written, not for money, and not for fame, but in the hope of supplying, for the children whom I love, some thoughts that may suit those hours of innocent merriment which are the very life of Childhood; and also in the hope of suggesting, to them and to others, some thoughts that may prove, I would fain hope, not wholly out of harmony with the graver cadences of Life.

Lewis Carroll

Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*