

Avenged! A poem by P G Wodehouse parodying Lewis Carroll

– rediscovered by Sarah Stanfield

Whilst researching for material to include in my talk *Barmy in Wonderland*, I raced down many rabbit holes in the search for information that would link my two authors – Lewis Carroll and P G Wodehouse. Many links were unfruitful or tenuous, but then I struck gold! – a poem I read about whilst reading Norman Murphy’s book *A Wodehouse Handbook* that showed Wodehouse knew and understood the work of Carroll, and illustrated his own skills as a parodist.

The poem called *Avenged* was published in *Punch* magazine on 11th February, 1903 when Wodehouse was 21 years old, and working as their staff writer. Both authors were keen readers of *Punch*, with Lewis Carroll using their political cartoonist John Tenniel to illustrate his best selling *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* published in 1865, and *Through the Looking Glass* published in 1871. Carroll also made sure his Oxford College, Christ Church, was a subscriber.

The poem Wodehouse pastiches is *The Walrus and the Carpenter* from ‘*Looking Glass*’, which is thought by some to be a parody of an earlier poem by Thomas Hood called *The Dream of Eugene Aram* published in *The Gem* magazine in 1829. Carroll, however, said “*I had no poem in mind. The metre is a common one...*”. It is also surmised that he may have gleaned the idea for the poem of the oyster’s sad demise from a *Punch* cartoon of 1862 (25th January) entitled *Law and Lunacy: Or, A Glorious Oyster Season for Lawyers*.

Bernard Partridge’s excellent cartoon (imitating Tenniel) is one of many using Carroll’s characters, even during his life time, to lampoon the undeserving – most commonly politicians. Partridge created another Carroll inspired cartoon for *Punch* with Tweedledee and Tweedledum fighting each other as warring Bulgaria and Greece; this use of Alice characters to satirise still continues today.

Both writers were better known for their fiction, but were prolific poets too. Carroll had a poem *Atalanta in Camden Town* published in *Punch* in 1867, and he also sent them humorous anecdotes. He began writing poetry whilst living at home with his ten brothers and sisters, publishing their own family magazine entitled *Useful and Instructive Poetry*. He included poetry in his novels – most famously *Jabberwocky*, *The Mock Turtle’s Song*, *You are old Father William...*, and *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, but he also wrote stand alone poetry books such as *Rhyme? And Reason?*, *Phantasmagoria and other Poems* and *The Hunting of the Snark*. He wrote his own parodies of medieval verse and Scottish ballads, and some on university politics were published anonymously.

Carroll mostly wrote his poetry for fun, but could succumb to Victorian bathos. He had an excellent ear for scanning and metre, and embraced cheerful violence – “*Speak roughly to your little boy*”, as well as dripping sentimentality – “*Seek ye Love, ye fairy-sprites?*” with equal skill. His creativity – whether it was aimed at poetry, photography, logic or fiction – was unbounded, and his aim was to entertain, challenge and delight his audience.

P G Wodehouse also began writing poetry from an early age. When five years old he wrote a gory verse about a battle field, writing beneath it “*this is a bit of poertory I made up*”. It was reproduced in *The Captain* in 1907.

Much of his early verse is clearly influenced by W S Gilbert and Edward Lear, but I feel Lewis Carroll contributed to his sense of the absurd and creative use of language.

The bulk of his poetry was written for *The Globe* and the *Daily Express* newspapers, and *Punch* magazine, where he worked whilst in his 20s. For both newspapers,

Wodehouse had to write daily topical verses, which were humorous, and at short notice – no mean achievement, especially for a man disinterested in politics. The topics he chose tended to be peripheral to the main headlines – the weather, beards, and food and drink rather than the politics of the day or wars. He rose to the challenge, producing hundreds of poems to a tight deadline. His excellent abilities in rhythm and scansion, honed during these early years as a writer of poetry, served him well when he embarked on a later career as a librettist for stage and screen.

Wodehouse wasn't averse to lampooning poets (despite his love of Shakespeare, Tennyson and Browning amongst others). He wrote a short article entitled *The Alarming Spread of Poetry* mocking *vers libre* (free verse which does not rhyme) and the increasing numbers of people writing volumes of poetry. He would distort well known quotations for humorous effect in his novels, poke fun at poets: "He can take Browning without anaesthetics" and wrote of " ... the unpleasant acrid smell of burnt poetry".

Armine (one of P G Wodehouse's elder brothers) also wrote poetry. In 1911 he went to India to become Professor of English at the Central Hindu College, and was a creative spiritual man. In 1914, at the age of 35, Armine joined the Army. He wrote and published poems about his military experiences in the Great War.

As readers of this bulletin, many of you will know about the sad tale of 'The Emsworth Oyster Scare', but briefly, for those of you who don't, in 1902 the harvesting of oysters from Chichester Harbour was banned due to the contamination of the oyster beds by untreated sewage. This was evident when a large consignment of oysters consumed at banquets in Southampton, Winchester and Portsmouth left two diners dead, and many others seriously ill after consuming them. This was covered by the national press, and as we know, Wodehouse was well acquainted with Emsworth and very fond

of the area, so he seized upon the story for one of his topical verses using Carroll's useful poem from *Through the Looking Glass*, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, which embraced a similar theme.

The poem *Avenged!* is precluded by Wodehouse with some Carrollian type text. The Tweedles had already begun the sorry tale of the Walrus and the Carpenter, and when there was a pause, Alice, who was keen to continue on her journey rather than listen to their poetry, comments on them being unpleasant characters, which leads to a typically tetchy interchange with the twins, who continue with their story. The darkly comic ending, is completed perfectly, but the final surreal phrase "*the isthmus of sewage*" was doubtless lifted from a recent press report. Wodehouse manages to recreate the tragi-comic poem, and contextualises it as part of a larger tale, with ease. His knowledge of Carroll's literary style, brand of humour and characterisation show his skills as a parodist are second to none. He references the Alice stories via quotes and situations in a number of his novels, showing he had a wide knowledge of even Carroll's lesser known characters.

This poem is a perfect marriage of both Carroll and Wodehouse's marvellous comedic skills.

With thanks to all those at Emsworth Museum and Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust for their help and support in compiling this article.

Continued overleaf

Sarah will be giving her talk, *Barmy in Wonderland When the Cheshire Cat met the Newt* on Thursday evening 7th March 2024 in Emsworth Community Centre as part of The Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust's winter series of talks.

Avenged! by P G Wodehouse

After a pause ALICE began, "Well, they were both very unpleasant characters -"

"De mortuis -" said TWEEDLEDEE reprovingly.

"I don't know what that means," said ALICE.

"You don't know much," said TWEEDLEDUM, "and that's a fact."

ALICE did not at all like the tone of this remark, and thought it would be as well to introduce some other subject of conversation.

"If you have really finished -?" she began, as politely as she could.

"Nohow. And thank you very much for asking," said TWEEDLEDUM.

"So much obliged," added TWEEDLEDEE. "There are four more verses."

He smiled gently, and began again: -

"O Carpenter," the Walrus said,

"Life's joys soon disappear.

There seem to be no oysters left,

We've swept the table clear."

The Carpenter said nothing but

"I'm feeling precious queer."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" said ALICE.

"O Carpenter," the Walrus said,

"I sympathise with you.

You say that you feel rather odd,

I doubt not that you do,

For, curious as it may appear,

I feel peculiar, too."

"The time has come," the Walrus said;

"To talk of doctors' bills,

Of pulses up to fever height,

Of medicine and pills.

I would not for the world alarm,

But – shall we make our wills?"

"O oysters!" moaned the Carpenter,

And that was all he said,

As on the coolest piece of rock

He laid his aching head.

The Walrus, too, refrained from speech,

He was already dead.

"And did the Carpenter get well?" asked ALICE.

"Nohow," said TWEEDLEDUM.

"Contrariwise," said TWEEDLEDEE; "he died."

"Well," said ALICE, "thank you very much, But I don't think the last four verses nearly so good as the others."

"Ah," said TWEEDLEDEE, "perhaps not. But they're much truer.

You see, those oysters were near the isthmus of sewage."



AVENGED !

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Wodehouse's parody appeared in Punch just three months after the fateful banquets in November 1902

Sarah Stanfield is a member of the Lewis Carroll Society and has served on the committee as both chairman and secretary. Her current interest in Lewis Carroll has been to find other authors inspired by his writing – hence, P G Wodehouse.