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10 December 2013

“The Walrus and the Carpenter” or Should I Say “Two Sick Bastards”

Picture a walrus and a carpenter walking along the beach and eating some oysters. Seems like a pretty silly picture, doesn't it? This is what Lewis Carroll's poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” (see appendix) does on the surface, but a darker picture lurks underneath. The rhyme scheme of the poem is written in such a way that it comes across almost sing-song-like and the setting is so pleasant that on one read through it seems like a harmless, nonsense poem. But on further examination the poem reads as a much deeper story exploring the guilt of someone who has done terrible things.

What needs to be addressed first is the Walrus and the Carpenter themselves. These two have some serious issues, that much is clear. In lines 31-36, the Walrus tries to convince some Oysters to walk along the beach with him and the Carpenter. The eldest Oyster refuses, for he is much smarter than that. Four young Oysters think it sounds like a wonderful time and decide to go along. These Oysters are described like this, “Their coats were brushed, their faces washed, / Their shoes were clean and neat” (45-46). This description of them as “clean” could be interpreted as them being innocent to the horrors that occur in the world. Because of the innocence of the Oysters, the Walrus and the Carpenter see a perfect opportunity to get a quick meal. As other Oysters see the first four young ones following the Walrus and the Carpenter they fall in line too, another example of their innocence. They willingly follow others without any concern for their own wellbeing.

The Walrus talks to the Oysters, distracting them from their eventual fate. ““The time has come," the Walrus said, / "To talk of many things: / Of shoes- and ships- and sealing wax- / Of cabbages- and kings— / And why the sea is boiling hot- / And whether pigs have wings"” (61-66). He even tries to deter them from going back into the sea, as he says it is boiling hot.

Next the Walrus and the Carpenter prepare some bread for the feast. At the mention of a feast the Oysters become frightened. The passage goes, ““Now if you're ready, Oysters dear, / We can begin to feed." // "But not on us!" the Oysters cried, / Turning a little blue. / "After such kindness, that would be / A dismal thing to do!"” (77-82). As the Oysters begin to fear, the Walrus quickly defuses the situation by distracting the poor Oysters yet again (83-86).

Suddenly the Walrus has a change of heart resulting in a little argument between him and the Carpenter. ““It seems a shame," the Walrus said, / "To play them such a trick, / After we've brought them out so far, / And made them trot so quick!" / The Carpenter said nothing but / "The butter's spread too thick!"” (91-96). The Carpenter's lack of response to the Walrus' concerns indicates he shows no remorse for what they are about to do. The Walrus seems the more morally sound of the two, which is interesting considering he is the “animal” of the duo.

In the last two stanzas the Walrus continues to feel guilt for their actions, but he sorts the Oysters and eventually eats them. So, although he felt guilt, it obviously was not enough to outweigh his desire to eat the Oysters. Or maybe he was pressured into the whole situation by the Carpenter and was too scared of him to back out. Either way the Walrus went through with the feast so even if he felt guilt he is not exempt from the

crimes he did. The Carpenter on the other hand continues to show no concern for their devouring of the Oysters, even joking about it at the end of the poem by saying to the Oysters, "'You've had a pleasant run! / Shall we be trotting home again?' / But answer came there none— / And this was scarcely odd, because / They'd eaten every one.'" (104-108)

Carroll took a normal seeming situation, or as normal as talking walruses and oysters are, and twisted it into some sort of messed up slaughter and feast of innocent beings. This act is covered up by a sing-song tone and pleasant wording, but there is definitely something sinister lurking underneath it all. Although eating oysters is a normal occurrence and most people wouldn't look at it as a terrible act, Carroll personifies the Oysters in this poem so they come across as intelligent creatures who have many feelings. Once personified the Oysters become something no longer for eating, but something you can emotionally attach to. This makes the act of the Walrus and the Carpenter seem sinister, even though it is something done all the time by people.

Now I need to go back and explain the beginning of the poem. The poem starts, "The sun was shining on the sea, / Shining with all his might: / He did his very best to make / The billows smooth and bright— / And this was odd, because it was / The middle of the night" (1-6). This part was completely nonsensical to me, but then I started to see the shady side of what Carroll wrote and I realized this first stanza was his way of telling us what he did with the poem. He took a dark deed, the night, and covered it up with some upbeat language and fantastical talking creatures, the sun.

In the fourth and fifth stanza the Walrus and the Carpenter come along the beach, they weep at the sight of all the sand and wish it could be cleared away (19-24). Sand is

another word for dirt, which is often viewed as a negative thing, a stain on one's reputation. These two already worry about the sand covering everything which indicates they have committed heinous acts in the past. A discussion occurs about the likelihood that their deeds could ever be erased, "'If seven maids with seven mops / Swept it for half a year, / Do you suppose," the Walrus said, / "That they could get it clear?" / "I doubt it," said the Carpenter, / And shed a bitter tear" (25-30). This is the only time the Carpenter shows regret, but he does not care for the ones he has harmed, he only cares for himself. He knows he can never go back from what they have done and so he sheds a tear, but then he moves on. The Walrus on the other hand is in denial and stays in that state for the whole poem. He refuses to accept what they do cannot be undone. He must know deep down they are too far-gone because, even though he feels guilt, he continues to commit these atrocities.

When I first picked up this poem I hoped to write a paper about some whimsical, nonsense story because those are the poems Carroll is known for. Instead I found myself writing about a pair of serial killers contemplating their acts and feeling different levels of guilt. The Carpenter has realized it is too late to go back and has given into the evil inside him, while the Walrus continues to torment himself thinking they can still make up for the wrong they have done. I think the true question this poem raises is: Can someone come back from the things they have done?

#### Works Cited

Carroll, Lewis. "The Walrus and the Carpenter." *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1871.

## “The Walrus and the Carpenter” by Lewis Carroll

1 The sun was shining on the sea,  
2 Shining with all his might:  
3 He did his very best to make  
4 The billows smooth and bright—  
5 And this was odd, because it was  
6 The middle of the night.

7 The moon was shining sulkily,  
8 Because she thought the sun  
9 Had got no business to be there,  
10 After the day was done—  
11 "It's very rude of him," she said,  
12 "To come and spoil the fun!"

13 The sea was wet as wet could be,  
14 The sands were dry as dry.  
15 You could not see a cloud, because  
16 No cloud was in the sky:  
17 No birds were flying overhead—  
18 There were no birds to fly.

19 The Walrus and the Carpenter  
20 Were walking close at hand;  
21 They wept like anything to see  
22 Such quantities of sand:  
23 "If this were only cleared away,"  
24 They said, "it would be grand!"

25 "If seven maids with seven mops  
26 Swept it for half a year,  
27 Do you suppose," the Walrus said,  
28 "That they could get it clear?"  
29 "I doubt it," said the Carpenter,  
30 And shed a bitter tear.

31 "O Oysters, come and walk with us!"  
32 The Walrus did beseech.  
33 "A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,  
34 Along the briny beach:  
35 We cannot do with more than four,  
36 To give a hand to each."

37 The eldest Oyster looked at him,  
38 But never a word he said:

39 The eldest Oyster winked his eye,  
40 And shook his heavy head—  
41 Meaning to say he did not choose  
42 To leave the oyster-bed.

43 But four young Oysters hurried up,  
44 All eager for the treat:  
45 Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,  
46 Their shoes were clean and neat—  
47 And this was odd, because, you know,  
48 They hadn't any feet.

49 Four other Oysters followed them,  
50 And yet another four;  
51 And thick and fast they came at last,  
52 And more, and more, and more—  
53 All hopping through the frothy waves,  
54 And scrambling to the shore.

55 The Walrus and the Carpenter  
56 Walked on a mile or so,  
57 And then they rested on a rock  
58 Conveniently low:  
59 And all the little Oysters stood  
60 And waited in a row.

61 "The time has come," the Walrus said,  
62 "To talk of many things:  
63 Of shoes- and ships- and sealing wax-  
64 Of cabbages- and kings—  
65 And why the sea is boiling hot-  
66 And whether pigs have wings."

67 "But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,  
68 "Before we have our chat;  
69 For some of us are out of breath,  
70 And all of us are fat!"  
71 "No hurry!" said the Carpenter.  
72 They thanked him much for that.

73 "A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,  
74 "Is what we chiefly need:  
75 Pepper and vinegar besides  
76 Are very good indeed—  
77 Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,  
78 We can begin to feed."

79 "But not on us!" the Oysters cried,  
80 Turning a little blue.  
81 "After such kindness, that would be  
82 A dismal thing to do!"  
83 "The night is fine," the Walrus said.  
84 "Do you admire the view?"

85 "It was so kind of you to come!  
86 And you are very nice!"  
87 The Carpenter said nothing but  
88 "Cut us another slice:  
89 I wish you were not quite so deaf—  
90 I've had to ask you twice!"

91 "It seems a shame," the Walrus said,  
92 "To play them such a trick,  
93 After we've brought them out so far,  
94 And made them trot so quick!"  
95 The Carpenter said nothing but  
96 "The butter's spread too thick!"

97 "I weep for you," the Walrus said:  
98 "I deeply sympathize."  
99 With sobs and tears he sorted out  
100 Those of the largest size,  
101 Holding his pocket-handkerchiefs  
102 Before his streaming eyes.

103 "O Oysters," said the Carpenter,  
104 "You've had a pleasant run!  
105 Shall we be trotting home again?"  
106 But answer came there none—  
107 And this was scarcely odd, because  
108 They'd eaten every one.