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Introduction

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel- *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) are among the most famed children's books of all times and yet offer much more than a simplistic fantastical narrative. Their riddles, puzzles, logic and inversions have well occupied the minds of adults as well as children for over a century. Written by an extremely brilliant mathematician and Oxford don, it amuses and entralls readers of all ages and generations

THE LIFE OF LEWIS CARROLL

Reverend Charles Dodgson, famously known as Lewis Carroll, was born on 27 January 1832, into a northern English family with Irish connection. In the early years, he was educated at home. It has been argued by various biographers that Lewis was left handed and forced to work against this natural tendency, which in turn left him frustrated and disappointed. This internal conflict between left and right is read as the reason for his simultaneous love for fiction and his dedication towards mathematics. Donald Rackin discusses the "abundant evidence of this carefully maintained separation between Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, conventional churchman and scrupulous devotee of logic and order, and Lewis Carroll, irreverent, playful celebrant of fantastic mayhem" (Rackin 111).

At twelve, he was sent to a small private school at Richmond where he spent some rather eventful years and the stay at the school helped him blossom as an individual. It was a happy period in Lewis' life and he loved going to the school. In 1845, he was sent to Rugby school. As opposed to his previous school, he did not like the place and talked about experiencing "annoyance at night" in one of his works. This has been interpreted as a reference to sexual abuse that he may have faced there as a child.

One of the most important periods in his life was when he took admission in his father's college, Christ Church, at Oxford. Just three days after his admission he received a call from home informing him that his mother had passed away because of a stroke. Nonetheless, he continued to work hard and did not let the tragedy come in his way. His stay at Oxford was a mixed bag. He excelled in academics due to his innate intelligence and mathematical acumen. However, his laziness cost him an important scholarship. At the same time, his prowess in mathematics won him the Christ Church Mathematical lectureship, which he was to hold for the next 26 years.

In 1856, he took up the new art form of photography and excelled at it. An important aspect about his nature was his ambitiousness. He wanted to rise in the society, as a writer or as an artist. He wrote short stories and poems and sent them to various publications. Between 1854 and 1856, his work appeared in national publications like *The Comic Times* and the *Train*. In 1856, he published his first piece of work *Solitude*, under the pen name Lewis Carroll. In the same year, he met Henry Liddell and forged a close bond with his children Ina, Alice and Edith. In 1865, he published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which was to make him a household name.

Despite the enormous popularity and wealth as a result of the success of the novel, Lewis continued to teach at Christ College until 1881, and remained in residence there until his death. He published *Through the Looking glass and What Alice Found There* in 1872 and his last novel, the two volume *Sylvie and Bruno*, in 1889 and 1893 respectively. He died on January 14, 1898, due to a sudden attack of pneumonia leaving behind a rich legacy of the Alice books, which is an invaluable treasure for children and adults across the globe.

ALICE

The followers of Alice have found much interest in delving into Dodgson's penchant for little girls below the age of twelve. According to Nina Auerbach, the Victorians on the whole saw little girls as the purest members of society combining the spirituality of child and woman (Auerbach335). From his childhood, he preferred to spend a lot of his time with his siblings, reading to and entertaining them. His stammering and the consequent fear of social life may have led him to spend a lot of time with his seven little sisters entertaining them with riddles, games and fantastical stories, plays and poetry.

The Alice of the *Alice in Wonderland* is the young Alice Liddell, the daughter of Henry George Liddell who was the Dean of the Christ Church College at Oxford. In a diary entry, Carroll describes how on July 4, 1862 he and his friend Reverend Robinson Duckworth took ten year old Alice and her two sisters on a boat ride. During this time he began telling them the fairy tale of a young girl named Alice and her underground adventures which she later pestered him to write down for her.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

While the Romantic writers in the preceding age had created the cult of the child, the Victorians were seriously engaging in extensive literary and scientific studies of child development (Shuttleworth 1). There were a lot of debates regarding Children's literature and what it ought to comprise during this time. Was Children's literature supposed to be simplistic which meant that its sole aim was to be read by children for entertainment? Or was it supposed to be didactic so that it could be used as a medium to make children conform to the values of the society? This dichotomy is evident in the interpretation of the Alice Books, which have been lauded as landmark children's fantasy books by some and brushed aside as "decadent adult literature rather than children's literature" (Gordon 144) by others.

Did you know?

Wordsworth (1770-1850) was a major English poet who heralded the Romantic age in literature with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (in collaboration with S.T. Coleridge) in 1798. In his oeuvre, he emphasized the importance of ordinary language instead of poetic diction and a harking back to nature which is a source of spiritual solace. The Wordsworthian child is the child of nature. Nature is the supreme teacher which teaches the unself-conscious child through imagination and experience.

Did You Know ?

John Calvin (1509-1564) was an important French theologian who believed in the idea of salvation only through grace and the absolute goodness of God. For Calvin, human beings are born as fallen. As a result of Adam's sin, all humans have a propensity towards evil since birth.

Victorian conceptions of children ranged from the Wordsworthian "The Child is father of the man" to the Calvinistic ideas of original sin; there was no particular conception of the inner child. The fear of the feral child who is wild and savage was offset by the guilt of denying children of an appropriate childhood. In such a conflicting worldview, children found it extremely difficult to come to terms with the reality of the adult world. A sense of 'disrootedness' and insecurity is constant in many of the Victorian novels like Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) etc. which were centered around child protagonists. A majority of characters in these novels are in search of their lineage, trying to find a vantage point from which to understand their existence. In fact, it is these key literary works, as argued by Professor Sally Shuttleworth, which played a formative

role in the development of the discipline of nineteenth century child psychiatry. "The figure of the child", she argues, "lies at the heart of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, race, and selfhood: a figure who is by turns animal, savage, or female, but who is located not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the very centre of English domestic life" (Shuttleworth 4).

The Alice books themselves embody the conflict faced by Alice where on the one hand she is constantly threatened by an advancing adulthood, and on the other hand she wants to hold on to the fantasy world where she rises to become a queen. Carroll combines the elements of fantasy and rebellion in these books as a curious response of the Victorian child who desired the world of fantasy as a place to realize their dreams and desires and also saw it as an escape from the impositions and restrictions of the adult world. Although Alice appears to be an epitome of Victorian modesty - her courteousness, modesty, courage, wit, tendency to cry are all expected from a Victorian girl child- she also challenges the conventions of her age in the questioning of her identity and in the questioning of the very subject of the dream itself - "Which dreamed it?"

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Carroll's finest masterpiece *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1865, is one of the few books of children's literature that lends itself to a myriad range of interpretations. The novel begins with Alice and her sister reading a book by the bank of the river. Alice's attention is swayed by a rabbit, the "White Rabbit" as it is called in the novel, which is to play a major part in the story. As she follows the rabbit, she falls into a tunnel from where starts her journey through the Wonderland.

It goes without saying that though on the surface, the novel is a simple story of a girl trapped in a nonsense world, it has layers of meanings attached to it. It is devoid of a conventional storyline of a coherent, unified tale. In the Wonderland, Alice meets strange creatures like the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse, the Duchess and so on. The most widely accepted interpretation of the novel revolves around the notion of a girl child's journey from childhood to maturity, along with the various challenges that she faces. In this context, Alice's change in size can be compared to the turbulent changes faced by the adolescents during puberty.

Alice can be viewed as a rebel, who explores the new and the frightful. However, from a feminist perspective, Alice can be seen as a girl child trapped in a patriarchal world, not very different from ours. She sometimes comes across as having little or no personal voice; being guided by the men she meets, like the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, the Mushroom and so on. At one point in the novel, the White Rabbit asks Alice to get his gloves and fan as he mistakes her for a servant. Far from rebelling against this treatment and introducing herself, Alice passively accepts these instructions. But, this can also be seen as a sign of her immaturity and it is precisely her formative journey towards agency and individuation that is charted in the novel, and its sequel.

Illustration made by Sir John Tenniel for the original edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* published in 1865.

The themes of identity and time are also central to the novel. The increase and decrease in

Alice's length is reflective of the amorphousness of her identity. She wonders about her own self: "I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle!" (*Wonderland*15) She is unable to answer the questions pertaining to her identity posed by many of the Wonderland creatures. In the seventh chapter, Alice is a witness to the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. For Mad Hatter, life is one big tea party as it is always 6 '0' clock in his watch. His watch shows the day of the year but the time remains constant. Through this episode, Carroll complicates the notion of living *in* time as the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Mad Hatter are trapped in a time bubble, but unaware of their predicament.

One can say that despite being a controversial piece of children's literature, *Alice in Wonderland* is a masterpiece that has captivated the imagination of children across centuries and continents. Hence, though one can never really be sure what Carroll had in mind when he was writing the book, it has acquired a legendary status amongst young and old readers alike.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

This and the following illustrations were made by Sir John Tenniel for the original edition of *Looking-Glass* published in 1871.

One of the important reasons for the enduring of the Alice books is the exceptional concurrence of the richness of the language juxtaposed with the precision of mathematics. The books are a fete comprising games, puzzles, jokes, and non-sense. This playfulness brought a depth to Carroll's literature that could not generally be found in children's

literature of the age and consequently led to its widespread success among readers of all ages. Brinda Bose interprets Carroll's style as his way of bringing a challenge to children's literature: "He wanted his readers to enjoy his fantasies but goaded them to exercise their intellects; he refused to impart moral lessons but expected his readers to rise to linguistic and mathematical and logical baits with enthusiasm and pleasure" (Bose xxii).

The entire tale has been ingeniously envisaged in the form of a chess game where the Red and the White teams alternate and Alice plays the White pawn. A lot of critics have pointed to the irregularity of the moves in accordance with the rules of chess but this would be overlooking the fact that the game is being played by mad creatures behind the mirror. Moreover, an absolute subservience to the rules of the game would, in my view, go against the spirit of freedom and questioning of the rules that are symbolized by children and Carrollian games. In any case, inscribing a fantastical tale onto the rules of the chessboard is an unprecedented and remarkable task which lends the story an extraordinary sense of excitement and brings the metaphor of the game to the real world just as the story brings the metaphor of the real life to the underground adventures.

Martin Gardner points to the various similarities between a chess game and the literary fairy tale. Just as the queens are the most powerful characters of a chess game who have the maximum mobility and reach on the board, in the story the queens are constantly active while their husbands, the kings are relatively incapable and dormant. Then, the tendency of the knights to fall off from their horses also suggests the knight's "wriggling" gait on the chessboard when it moves one square to its right or left after walking two paces back or forth. Crossing a brook symbolizes the crossing of a row in the game and a hedge separates one column from another (170). As against the confused Alice of *Wonderland*, in this novel, structured on the rules of a chess game, she acts maturely and is oriented towards her goal of becoming a queen.

The book begins with a nostalgic mood appropriately communicated by the form of poetry where Carroll bemoans the fleetingness of time and the inexorability of the loss of childhood to maturity. The tenor of the writing is quite pessimistic as compared to the *Wonderland* which was published six years ago. Even the character of Alice can hear "voice of dread" of the adult world; she no longer remains the carefree child of the *Wonderland* who is free to explore and discover but has to move towards a discernible target following the rules set for her.

The setting of the scene in mid-winter with Alice sitting indoors is also characteristic of the gloomy mood that the advent of adulthood produced in Carroll as winter and snow symbolize age and death. This is also in contrast with the setting of the prequel which begins on a warm May afternoon outdoors. Carroll's distinctive love of contrast is reflected in the looking-glass motif used throughout the tale. The twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee are mirror images of each other. The rules of the looking-glass world in which Alice enters are based on inversions of the logic of the outside world. The themes of reversal and inversion reverberate throughout the tale. Alice has to walk in the opposite direction to approach the Red Queen. The cake at the party is first distributed to everyone and then sliced. Alice's vision is complimented by the White King to be able to see nobody from a great distance.

NON-SENSE IN LITERATURE

The idea of bringing non-sense into literature, something which exists on the basic premise of sense and rationality, is itself associated with the theme of inversion and distortion. Carroll was so engrossed with this theme that he not only used it in his other works but also in real-life correspondence with friends and acquaintances. He used to write letters in an inverted way so that the reader had to read it through a mirror. In other cases, the letters had to be read backwards, beginning from the last word. Yet, one should not make the error of considering non-sense literature as just literature devoid of sense. In fact, inversions and reversals, as in the case of matter and anti-matter, have been subjects of serious scientific enquiry. Numerous scientists and philosophers, even today, are engaged in exploring the philosophical and material ramifications of inversion of matter and energy.

The famous non-sense poem "Jabberwocky" that Alice reads is extremely obscure to her and the readers, is probably a take on an ancient ballad. Here, contrary to the stress on sense in poetry, the primary focus is on the sounds. The rules imposed by logic and custom at times become too restrictive, are flouted in favor of a fecund and imaginative terrain as can be seen in the reception history of the poem which has been endlessly quoted, translated and adapted. The menagerie of different creatures in the Alice books belongs to a post-Darwinian view point which believed in mutation and continuous evolution (Gordon 148). Scientific thinking has to be necessarily open to the possibility of the existence of different worlds and newer dimensions. Interestingly, the new language and vocabulary of the poem is seen as a key to entering into other realms and dimensions of existence in the novels of Lewis Padgett and Fredric Brown.

THEME OF REVERSAL

The theme of reversal pervades throughout the book. Alice is not able to reach the top of the hill because she keeps on approaching it, following the law of the world outside the looking-glass world. The Rose flower's quip that "It's *my* opinion you never think *at all*" is actually an exhortation to all the readers to use their critical faculties instead of following the givens (10). This is further reinforced by Tiger-lily's admonition to Rose, especially when the reader is aware that Rose and Violet flowers are references to Alice Liddell's two youngest sisters, Rhoda and Violet: "As if *you* ever saw anybody! You keep your head under the leaves, and snore away there till you know no more what's going on in the world, than if you were a bud!" (ibid.) No single point of view is privileged.

On the arrival of the Red Queen, Alice succeeds in meeting her only when she walks in the opposite direction. According to Donald Rackin, Victorian England is a fragmented society undergoing rapid socio-political changes and numerous technological advances. This leaves no sense of coherence and serenity in the social realm. All this is

reflected in Alice's "fast-paced, crowded, discontinuous dream adventures" (102).

The Red Queen remarks: "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" (23). Moreover, the Red Queen's coldness is in some way a consequence of her formal and pedantic personality which was consciously modeled by Carroll like a Victorian governess. The Red Queen is emblematic of rigidity and intolerance. The only way that she will allow anyone to have, is hers. Giving a dry biscuit to panting Alice who is in need of water is an instance of her bigotry.

The train scene represents the regimentation and commercialization of time and space in the nineteenth century. In this increasingly consumerist society, time is now equated with money. Alice's fellow passengers all chime together in a chorus: "Don't keep him waiting, child! Why, his time is worth a thousand pounds a minute!" (26). Train tickets the size of human beings imply that social and commercial institutions have now acquired even greater significance than the human beings they were made to serve. Here, one might remember that the first creature Alice meets in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the White Rabbit who is a slave to his watch and busy schedule.

When Alice enters the wood "where things have no names", she ponders over the advertisements of lost dogs – "answers to the name of 'Dash'" (31). The name ascribed to the dog is not its real name but an arbitrary sign it identifies with. It is similar in the case of everything else in the world. It is in this way that the wood resembles the bracketed universe where the only relation between the signifier and signified is the convenience of the conscious mind.

The two fat little men - Tweedledum and Tweedledee are mirror images of each other to such an extent that the inversion is not just physical but their thought processes also run "contrariwise" to each other. The predetermined plot follows the nursery rhyme where the twins are fighting for a rattle and a monstrous crow comes and frightens them. In the woods, Tweedledee remarks that Alice and the pair themselves are but figments of the Red King's dream. In Carroll's other novel *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889), the narrator speculates: "Is Life itself a dream, I wonder?"

The White Queen lives in a state she calls "living backwards" (45). It is in accordance with her absent-mindedness that the disheveled White Queen does not play the game properly and therefore misses out on multiple opportunities to win the game as, for instance, in missing an opportunity to checkmate the Red King. The looking-glass world can also be seen as a parody of the rules and institutions of the external world. Referring to the King's Messenger, the White Queen describes: "He's in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all" (45-46).

CARROLL AND NURSERY RHYMES

Carroll uses the technique of reverting to dream states of nursery rhymes whose juvenility and play with language allows a distance from society, history and 'reality' to, paradoxically, analyze them closely. The Humpty Dumpty episode, like Tweedledum-Tweedledee, is also modeled on a famous nursery rhyme. Humpty Dumpty is an egocentric and childish character who follows an inverted logic in everything he does. For him, contrary to ordinary understanding, common words could have any particular meaning that he ascribes to them whereas proper nouns should have a general significance. "When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean-neither more nor less", he comments haughtily (57). Yet, ironically, he is already himself 'quoted', i.e. imported from the nursery rhyme which describes his fall and breaking into pieces (Cixous 232-233).

"[A]lthough grasping even the easiest meanings, the simplest relations between words and things", Carroll seems to suggest, "is a terrible tricky business, it is one the chief tasks we humans are made of" (Rackin 113). Humpty Dumpty tries to make philosophical arguments but his hubris never allows him to look at things in the right perspective. The satirical effect comes from his insistence upon exactness. He misinterprets the poem "Jabberwocky"

entirely destroying its mystical effect. Moreover, his mathematical skills, which symbolize critical reasoning for Carroll, are not good at all.

The looking-glass world is severely logical. When Alice is having a discussion with the two queens, her justification that she didn't really mean what she said is cut short by the Red Queen's insistence that one should only say things that mean something (83). The White King's tendency to take phrases literally instead of their accepted meanings, like the other looking-glass creatures is the basis of much humor. The unyielding conformity to the logical demands of language in the looking-glass world suggests "rather a sense of insanity in the ordinary world" (Spacks 166). On the other hand, Alice's words are charged with great power as the nursery rhymes that she recites actually decide the fate of the characters throughout the book. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, "It is the power of words that eliminates the possibility of change from the Looking-Glass world: actions are by words eternally fixed, and no deviation from them is conceivable" (170). The text is replete with instances where the words create the event.

CHILDHOOD TO MATURITY

The White Knight defeats the Red Knight and takes Alice to the next brook so that she can be a Queen. He is the only character in the two Alice books who is kind towards her and it is because of this fact that some think that he is a caricature of Carroll himself. Carroll's mind worked best when he could see things upside down just as the White Knight could talk comfortably with his head downwards: "In fact, the more head downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things" (76). The White Knight's assistance and the air of melancholy when he bids farewell to her may hint at Carroll's own distress at the thought of the loss of his child-friends to youth. The scented rushes that fade as soon as picked are symbolic of the evanescence of beauty and of Carroll's child-friends.

The two queens sleep in Alice's lap when she remarks that never in the history of England one had to take care of two queens at once. After the feast she captures the Red Queen who had diminished to the size of a doll and wins the game. According to Helene Cixous, Alice's ability to adapt, the compromises she makes, the playacting that she can carry on with other characters – are all traits of an adult. And she is surrounded by infantile characters throughout her

sojourn in the looking-glass world (237).

Alice's sensible question "Can you keep from crying by considering things?" to the White Queen's senseless blathering gains weight when one gets acquainted with Carroll's view that rational exercise deters unholy thoughts from the mind. In one of his letters, Carroll dissuades his child-friend Mary Macdonald against gullibility. If one sees these books in the light of the growth of a child then the experiences and encounters of Alice help her to form an identity organically rather than by just following the dictates of society. The looking-glass inhabitants like the identical twins who are men-children, and the immature Humpty Dumpty, are projections of the childish stages Alice has left behind. "Like pieces in a game she has already won", remarks Donald Rackin, these creatures who are "parts of her former psychic self, still in some sense operative, but now subdued, perceived as childish, and thus under her conscious control" (133).

At the end of the journey Alice is faced by a dilemma of "Which dreamed it?" which, in

turn, for the reader becomes a postmodern questioning of the very reality we inhabit: "Life, what is it but a dream?" This feeling of doubt and uneasiness on the part of Alice is also a marker of her entry into the adult world which focuses on the visible, the real, proofs etc. The possibility that the dream was perhaps not even Alice's own is also a critical reminder of the fact that the society expects the children to learn and follow its rules and customs once they become adults. While the Victorians brought up their children in such a way as to dictate and direct their way of life, Alice, and perhaps the readers, are urged by Carroll to keep alive the spirit of play even when they cross the threshold into the adult world of grim and harsh realities. The rebellion lies in the refusal to accept normative structures and to engage one's own critical faculties to interpret the world.

SUMMARY

The novel begins with Alice sitting in her armchair lost in the maze of her thoughts. She tells her Kitty about the "Looking Glass World" that exists on the other side of the mirror where everything is topsy-turvy and backward. Just as Alice is wondering if they can go to the other side of the mirror to explore the looking-glass world, the glass begins to melt and Alice jumps to the other side. From here starts the series of meetings and adventures of Alice.

Alice meets the Red Queen who lets Alice play the role of a white pawn in the game of chess, much to Alice's delight. From here, she moves into the forest, where she encounters a goat, a beetle and a man dressed in white paper in the train journey. An important part of the novel is Alice's meeting with Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the twins who are mirror images of each other. On close reading, this episode reflects on the theme of inversion which is central to the novel.

After this takes place Alice's meeting with the White queen. This meeting is significant as the White queen tells Alice that time moves backward in their world. As they speak, the White queen, contrary to the logic of the real world, successively plasters her fingers, screams in pain and then pricks her finger on a brooch. Alice then meets Humpty Dumpty of the nursery rhyme, who is arrogant and mocks her as she has a name that does not mean anything. According to him, all names should mean something.

Alice meets various other interesting people during the rest of her journey, like the Red Knight and the White Knight. The White Knight guides her to the eighth square where she can be a queen. After becoming a queen she goes to a banquet but the party degenerates into total madness and confusion. After this, Alice wakes from the dream holding Kitty. She thinks aloud if her

adventures were her own imagination or the dream of the Red King and the novel ends with a question posed by her to the reader - "Which *do you* think it was?"

XII. GLOSSARY

Fete A large elaborate party

Nursery Rhyme A short simple poem or song for very young children

Victorian Pertaining to Queen Victoria of England or the period of her reign (1837-1901)

Unicorn A mythical animal generally depicted with the head of a horse, the hind legs of a stag, the tail of a lion, and a single horn in the middle of the forehead

Prequel A literary, dramatic or filmic work that prefigures a later work, as by portraying the same characters at a younger age

XIII. IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

- Alice meets various characters who treat her in their own unique manner. Why do you think they act the way they do and what effect does it have on Alice?
- How is the motif of chess central to an understanding of "Through the Looking Glass"? Explain.
- In the words of eminent critic Jan B.Gordon, the Alice books are "decadent adult literature rather than children's literature". Comment.
- The question of identity is central to the politics of the novel. What questions about identity does Alice raise in the text and how do they tie up with the Victorian conception of a child?
- The book ends with Alice posing a question to the readers "Who it was that dreamed it all...it must have been either me or the red king?". Why do you think the novel ends with a question?
- Discuss the importance of dreams in the novel.

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