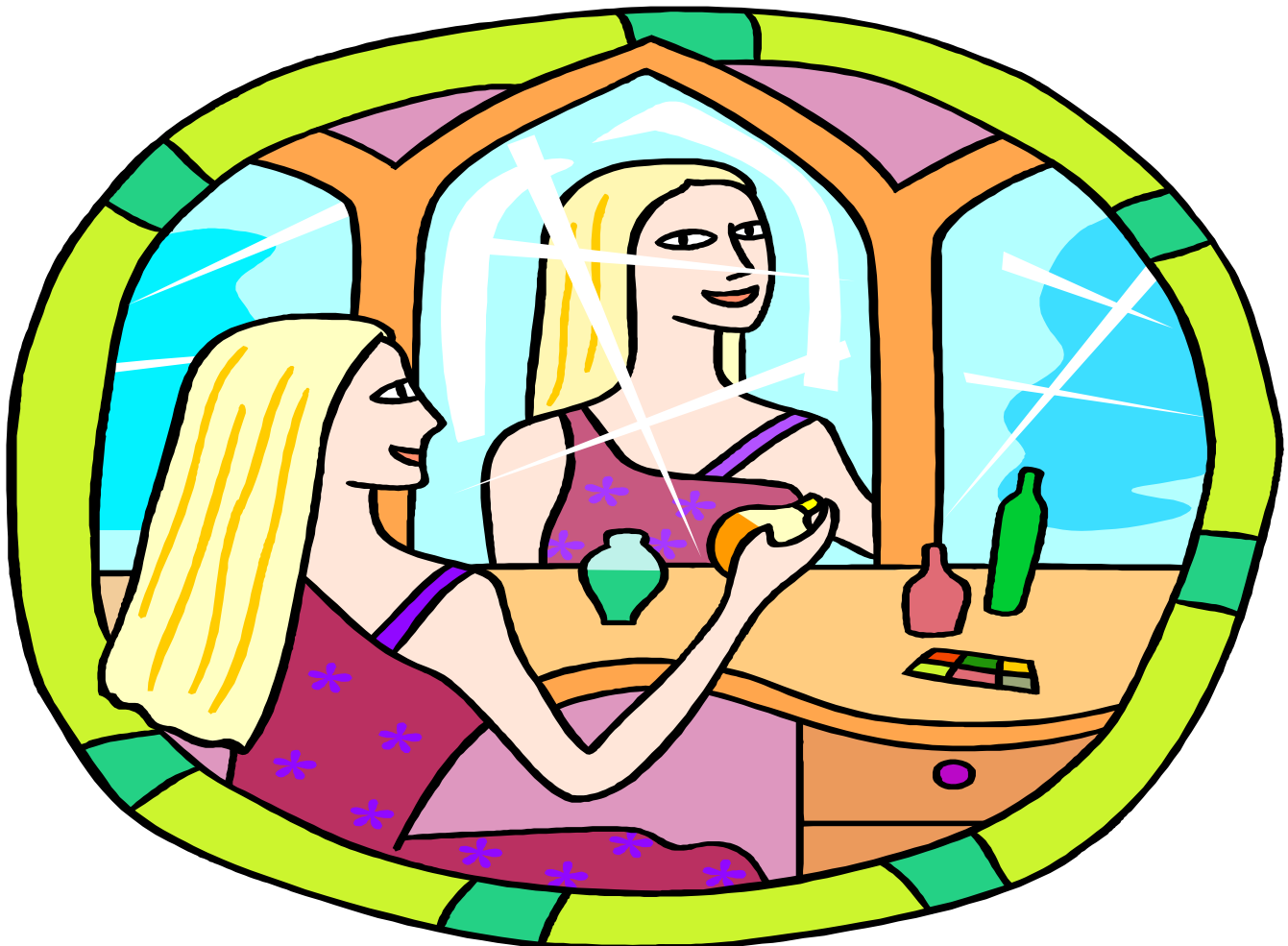


Making Sense of Nonsense:  
A Literary Analysis of  
*Alice's Adventures in  
Wonderland* and *Through the  
Looking Glass*



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**Making Sense of Nonsense: A Literary Analysis of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*  
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Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are masterpieces of nonsense literature, enjoyed as fiction by children and intriguing to adults as symbolic and even allegoric on multiple levels. Carroll's loving artistry in crafting a fantastical Wonderland is eclipsed only by his mastery of the absurd; as Alice tumbles down the rabbit-hole and finds herself wandering through the looking-glass, she encounters peculiarities that could only originate from a masterful imagination. Although many have attempted to interpret *Alice* from their particular field of interest, the strength of *Alice* is that Carroll has successfully captured in words the mind of a child – where the sum of all things nonsensical somehow makes sense, and the road through Wonderland, though fraught with frustration and loneliness, eventually leads to understanding.

Charles Dodgson, a.k.a Lewis Carroll, was an Englishman of high social standing and deep religious conviction. An ordained minister in the Church of England and a mathematics professor at Oxford, he led a tranquil, uneventful and quite asexual life; as he described himself: "My life is so strangely free from all trial and trouble, that I cannot doubt my own happiness is one of the talents entrusted to me to "occupy" with, till the Master shall return, by doing something to make other lives happy. (*AA* iv.)" However dreary his life may have been on the exterior, Dodgson was a man with a quick wit and

an insatiably curious mind. He was interested in puppetry, magic tricks, photography, chess, and almost any other game imaginable. And he was extremely interested in puzzles, especially logic problems. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and especially *Through the Looking-Glass* are inseparable from the numerous logical inversions within them, such as the disappearing Cheshire Cat, the mushrooms that cause Alice to grow big and small, the looking-glass world and the game of chess that Alice plays against the Red King and Queen. Dodgson was fascinated with inversions; he was an asymmetric man himself, having one shoulder higher than the other, one deaf ear, and being left handed. Even his pseudonym, Lewis Carroll, is a reversal of his Christian name Charles Lutwidge (after Latinization).

Being so fancifully constructed on whimsy and the curiosities of the natural order (or disorder) of the universe, therefore, *Alice* has endeared itself to young and old, but especially to mathematicians and scientists, who find great universal truths in Wonderland. Any number of interpretations of *Alice* have been argued, from psychoanalytical, to Freudian, to scientific, to satirical. Ultimately, however, it is a nonsense tale with a faint morality; its characters put on a spectacle of insane antics, but all is tinged with the sadness of ephemerality.

Carroll makes little attempt to represent Alice's adventures as anything other than fantasy, as both adventures occur entirely within Alice's dreams. Indeed, it seems highly implausible that her adventures could be anything *but* a dream, even if Carroll could lead the reader to believe in a world with Mock Turtles and talking chess pieces.

As a series of fantastic, self-contained vignettes, the narrative structure of *Alice* is somewhat weak, much more in *Wonderland* than *Looking-Glass*, the latter of which is bound together by a chess game. *Wonderland* takes on a much more dreamlike quality, as the action is almost stream-of-consciousness. For instance, Alice sees the White Rabbit running down his rabbit-hole and follows him, where she finds, at the end of a long fall, a series of small doors. As in a dream, thoughts and emotions dictate reality, and so as she wonders how to get through the doors, a potion labeled “DRINK ME” conveniently appears. Needing to obtain the key to the door, however, she conveniently finds a cake labeled “EAT ME,” and does so, which causes her to grow disproportionately long-necked. However, now she is so upset at being gigantic that she breaks down in tears, which causes her to cry a river, which causes her to get lost in the deluge (now conveniently normal-sized), which washes her up onto the shore where the Duck and the Dodo hold their Caucus-race. (*MAA* 10-34)

This dream-like stream of consciousness is repeated to an even greater effect in *Looking-Glass*, when Alice, in the midst of talking to the Red Queen, discovers the Queen has turned into a Sheep, and the Sheep is now sitting in a shop and knitting (with fourteen needles). Declaring “Things flow about so here!” Alice attempts to get her bearings. However, just as quickly as the Red Queen turned into a Sheep, the shop turns into a rowboat and the Sheep and Alice are rowing a boat down a stream. When the boat suddenly turns back to the shop, Alice asks to buy an egg from the Sheep. The Sheep puts the egg on a shelf and Alice attempts to reach it, but it moves farther from her the closer

she gets (a pre-Einstein Einsteinian notion and a common facet of dream logic), and eventually turns into Humpty Dumpty sitting on a wall. (*MAA* 232-246)

This is not Tolkien. Carroll is not at all interested in the geography of his fantasy, as the necessary motivation is all in Alice's curiosity. As long as she continues to explore, her adventures will always be waiting for her; such is the nature of dream logic. They take on a hyper-real quality because they are the reality of Alice's mind, the imagination of a young girl. Everything in Wonderland and Looking-Glass house revolves around Alice. She is the objective observer in a mad, upside-down, inside-out world, which itself takes on a kind of duality as Alice so often seeks to make sense of the nonsense.

Crucial to analyzing and understanding *Alice* is the knowledge that much of it can be interpreted, in one form or another, as satire. The most forthright satirical elements are the myriad poems scattered through both books. Many of the major characters are interested in verse, most notably the Caterpillar, who demands Alice recite "You are Old, Father William" and scolds her for bungling it; the Mock Turtle; Tweedledee and Tweedledum, who recite the very famous "Walrus and the Carpenter;" and Humpty Dumpty, who explains "Jabberwocky" to Alice and shares a poem of his own. Nearly every poem in *Alice* is a satire, or burlesque, of other popular Victorian poems. They range from the very obvious burlesques, such as the Mad Hatter's "Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat" to the subtle jabs at Tennyson in the garden of live flowers, and Wordsworth in "Sitting on a Fence." Carroll used these poems to great effect to take shots at a stuffy, restrictive Victorian society, of which he himself, ironically, was a member of the upper

class. Though mostly harmless, his poems did get him into a bit of trouble: his mocking of Tennyson's dated and pretentious poetry cost him their friendship, for example. Although an extremely devout Anglican clergyman, Carroll took shots at the Church through his poetry as well.

Although seemingly random and spontaneous, Carroll's nonsense poems add greatly to the whimsy of Wonderland. *Alice* critic John Ciardi disagrees on the pretense that they are nonsense, and distract from the text. "Suppose that Carroll had written not a poem but an orchestral *scherzo*, a simple but brilliant piece of fun-music: would one be so readily tempted to call such music "nonsense?" declares Ciardi in his article on the poems of Alice (*Aspects* 260). Indeed, the poems themselves are not as nonsensical as they appear, as with the host of Wonderland's colorful characters, when looked at through the lens of satire.

Needless to say, Carroll was as fascinated with the study of language as he was with mathematics. As a book intended for children, but written with an adult's wit and a mathematician's sense of whimsy, Carroll imbues *Alice* with crass puns and brainteasers alike. Harnessing as much variability between the subtle and the overt as with the poetry in *Alice*, Carroll flows easily from light-hearted punning to hidden puzzles to sharp-witted, subversive barbing. While the Mock Turtle's diatribe about his school days is packed with easy, juvenile puns on the names of the classes (Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils are Drawing, Sketching, and Painting in Oils, respectively); the White Queen's statement that Alice can have "jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam

today” (*MAA* 234) is a linguist’s puzzle: *jam* or *iam* is the Latin word for ‘now,’ but only when used in the past and future tense. Therefore, it is not only a beguiling puzzle, but a fitting play on words, that the impossibility of ‘now’ never coming makes perfect sense behind the Looking-Glass. Replies the Queen: “That’s the effect of living backwards... it always makes one a little giddy at first” (*AA* 234).

Carroll’s wit shines in his prose as well as his poetry, as he toys with sanity at the Mad Tea Party. As “mad as a March Hare” and “mad as a Hatter” were common expressions to the Victorian reader, naturally the hosts of the Party are the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. With the sleepy Dormouse, they seem to be the most out-of-place, lunatic characters in the first book, if not all of *Alice*. Their Tea Party seems to exist outside of time and space, even by Wonderland standards. Carroll describes it simply as a “table set out under a tree in front of the house,” where the three sit at tea, oblivious to time (*AA* 82). The Hatter’s watch has stopped, but he asks Alice for the day of the month, since his watch, naturally, doesn’t tell the time of day. Later on the Hatter reveals that it is always six o’clock at the Mad Tea Party, an existential nightmare, and another familiar aspect of dream logic. The Hatter seems to be aware of his misfortune as well, as he laments: “‘Yes, that’s it,’ said the Hatter with a sigh: ‘it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.’” Alice questions him, “Then you keep moving round, I suppose?” to which he replies “Exactly so... as things get used up.” When Alice again tries to pinpoint him for an answer, as she does very often when Wonderland’s distorted logic emerges, the subject is changed. Insanity (and perhaps curiosity, which may not be completely removed from madness) is the single cohesive thread that binds *Alice*

together, and Carroll's prevailing opinion seems to be that insanity raises many questions, but fails to provide any answers. As Einstein defined it: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." The Hatter and the Hare, as well as most of Wonderland's bizarre inhabitants, are locked into behavior patterns that are primarily determined by their nature (i.e., a Mad Hatter must, by definition, be mad; although he doesn't always show those characteristics, he is enslaved to his nature) and secondarily determined by the topsy-turvy nature of Wonderland logic. In Alice's myriad adventures she always greets each character with an expectation of logic, and more often than not is appalled and even distressed by the lunacy of it all. It's safe to argue, from an analytical standpoint, that Carroll couldn't help but comment on his own frustrations in dealing with the overbearing rationality of Victorian society, or perhaps his aggravation at the irrationality of the pagan world outside the Church, and uses Alice to express the mad nature of it all. In many ways, *Alice* is a man throwing his hands up in quiet relent to the furious self-importance of the world he saw.

Alice's encounter with Humpty Dumpty can be said to be one of the three main focal points of a literary analysis of *Alice*, the other being the Mad Tea Party and the trial of the Knave of Hearts. In his article in *Aspects of Alice*, J.B. Priestly correctly identifies Humpty as a satire on modern critics. When Alice first "meets" him (he in fact morphs from the egg she bought in the Sheep's shop), he is high on his wall, referencing the authoritative pretentiousness that critics bestow upon themselves. Like any critic, he is full of criticism. His first words are a snappy retort to Alice upon being called an "egg": "It's very provoking," Humpty Dumpty said after a long silence, looking away from



Alice as he spoke, “to be called an egg – very!” What sets Humpty apart from the other Wonderland characters is his resentment of his own nature. He hates being called an egg, or even being told that he looks like an egg. Much like many critics are driven by their own self-loathing to critique others’ work, so too does Humpty replace his own inadequacy with a resounding self-justification: the ability to distinguish quality from rubbish. Not to say that Humpty doesn’t do a fine job of critiquing Alice’s English, in fact he traps her several times as she uses idioms that she doesn’t really mean. The critical self-importance is as thin as the shell encasing Humpty’s soft innards, however, and Humpty’s poem fails to impress, leading to his quick departure. *More Annotated Alice* editor Martin Gardner cites Richard Kelly in his footnote on the Humpty scene: “‘This has to be the worst poem in the *Alice* books,” writes Kelly... ‘The language is flat and prosaic...’ (MAA 258). It isn’t that Carroll had a momentary lapse in creativity, but rather it is a calculated device to show the critic’s inadequacy behind the veneer of self-glorification. Humpty, like so many other Wonderland characters, is alone in his delusions and his self-importance. He has no social relevance but that which is involved with himself; i.e., he sits on a wall and criticizes others. With his inevitable fall in sight, Carroll satirizes the utter futility of the lonely soul, especially one with an ego as inflated as Humpty’s, to the point where he is so self-deluded that he doesn’t understand his own purpose – to fall.

If both novels can be looked at as two parts of the same adventure, then the trial of the Knave of Hearts is the centerpiece. It is the culmination of the dream logic, chaos, and isolation motifs found throughout *Wonderland* and the introduction to the madness to

come in *Looking-Glass*. Because Wonderland is a monarchy, the King of Hearts is the judge in the case. The White Rabbit reads the evidence brought against the Knave by reading the familiar nursery rhyme from a scroll.

“The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts,  
All on a summer day:  
The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts,  
And took them quite away!” (*MAA* 135)

The jury is just as ludicrous: made entirely of animals and birds that scribble nonsense on slates. They’re first mentioned scribbling their names down so they don’t forget them, one of Carroll’s many satirical jabs at the justice system prominent in this scene; when Alice begins to grow again and accidentally knocks over the jury box, she puts the lizard back in upside down and remarks, “I should think it would be *quite* as much use in the trial one way up as the other.”

Aside from the obvious chaos and madness of the scene, however, there is also a subtle display of dream logic and a powerful sense of isolation as Alice grows back to full size and begins to wake up from her dream. The dream logic is in Alice’s growth itself, as it manifests itself as the dominant presence in the trial. When she is small, the King’s “justice” is the absolute authority, but as she grows the King and his court are threatened by her size and orders that “All persons more than a mile high [are] to leave the court.” As she grows, she becomes more indignant with the nonsense and is emboldened to speak out, too. When the Queen makes the preposterous declaration “Sentence first—verdict afterwards,” Alice retorts, “Stuff and nonsense!” which causes the cards to turn on her. The scene ends with Alice dismissing the King and Queen and their court as “nothing but a pack of cards!” and they fly up at her violently as she wakes from her

dream. In the end, therefore, it's Alice's realism that defeats the dream and gives her power over the lunacy of injustice.

The end of a dream is always the greatest moment of clarity, especially when one wakes abruptly as Alice does. The most incisive moment of clarity for Alice in *Wonderland* is her fear and frustration she experiences when she realizes she is alone. Where everywhere else the crazy characters take center stage, she is the focal point at the end. That the trial of the Knave of Hearts is so similar to the final scene at the banquet for Queen Alice in *Looking-Glass* is not entirely coincidental; both end with Alice at a convergence of her friends and enemies, and her realization that she controls her fantasy and is the final arbiter of logic. Both the trial and the banquet are explosive finales, with some great action occurring at the very end to wake Alice from her dream; in *Wonderland* it is the argument with the Queen of Hearts and her final declaration, in *Looking-Glass* it is her upsetting of the banquet and capture of the villainous Red Queen. Both endings, however, are not meant to be seen as the vengeful struggle of good against evil (there are no 'evil' characters in *Alice*, as there is no morality but logic, and only offensive violators of logic are Alice's opponents) but rather as the conquering of the irrational with the rational, an event Carroll must have seen as necessary to maintaining the natural order of the universe.

Knowing full well the pain of childhood through his own youth and vicariously through his experiences with the Liddell girls, Carroll weaves into this centerpiece scene a sense of the pain of growth. When Alice grows too big to be in this small world of nonsense she is

expelled, and, like a child excluded from a game, decries the madness as inferior and wakes from the dream of childhood. The games of children are very much like the world of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* in that the focus shifts rapidly between scenes, creating bizarre characters out of every-day people and animals and, most importantly, never stopping to question whether the play is logical or even meaningful. Like the Mad Tea Party, there are no rules except those that concern the nature of the game; there is no order that isn't dictated by the controller of the game. As Alice begins her dream with a curious stumble down the rabbit-hole, she ends it with a furious rumble in the courtroom. Along the way she is shrunk in size to the confines of her fantasy, but her small stature "wears off" as she begins to see the nonsense of it all. Like a child entering adolescence, she must come face-to-face with her position in the world.

If there is any central moral or emotional motif in *Alice*, therefore, it is isolation: the isolation that comes with the abandonment of childhood for adolescence, the psychological fear of growth itself, and the sense of displacement one feels adrift in an illogical and irrational place. It's arguable that Carroll felt all of these things at one time or another, perhaps the first two mostly vicariously through his experiences with the Liddell girls, and the third with his sense of displacement as a creative and imaginative soul in the buttoned-up world of Oxford and the Anglican Church.

The incident with the Fawn in *Looking-Glass* is the best example of this isolation. As Alice is wandering through a wood ("where things have no names" *MAA* 210) on her way to the Eighth Square, she discovers a Fawn, but neither can remember their names. They

travel together, nameless, for a little while, but when they come to a clearing, the Fawn exclaims, “I’m a Fawn! And dear me! You’re a human child!” (*MAA* 211) and runs away. Symbolic not only of children’s dependence on personal identification for meaning, this most poignant event in *Alice* represents Carroll’s own isolation within Victorian society. His relationship with the young Alice Liddell, though as peculiar in modern ideology as a partnership between a fawn and a human child, made sense to Carroll because it was a relationship without labels. Carroll was no more a middle-aged clergyman-professor than Alice was a young child; they were kindred spirits.

Though the vast majority of *Alice* is so vehemently unsentimental and utterly abhorrent of human rationality or human emotion (many have seen in it parallel to Twain’s insistence that no moral be found in *Huckleberry Finn*, some have even suggested that Twain wrote it in conspiracy with Dodgson), there is a faint darkness to everything. Almost every character Alice encounters is crazy and lonely; none display the desire for order and purpose that Alice maintains, and almost all are bound by their nature as characters. The Mad Hatter is necessarily a mad hatter, the Ugly Duchess is an ugly duchess, the Mock Turtle is a fake turtle (and sad, too, because of his false nature), and Humpty Dumpty is an egg that must sit on a wall (and have a great fall.) Carroll himself felt trapped in his nature as a conservative logician, and in many respects *Alice* is his own personal rebellion against the system.

*Alice in Wonderland* and *Through The Looking-Glass* have been highly influential on 20<sup>th</sup> century culture to the point of pure diffusion. Numerous remakes including stage

versions (the first written by Carroll himself), films, a popular Disney animated feature, and hundreds of republications of the books themselves have become so thoroughly ingrained in Western cultural identity that it's impossible to number their exact influences. Most everyone can name at least four or five characters from the *Alice* books; thanks to *Alice*, every American schoolchild who's never heard of Cheshire County in England can still identify a Cheshire Cat. Some Carrollian words have even entered the lexicon, like 'chortle' and 'snark.' And there will almost always be an association of ordinary objects and animals with *Alice*, so strong are the characters; consider the Dormouse, the Horsefly, the hookah-smoking Caterpillar, and of course, the White Rabbit.

Because these characters have become such strong archetypes on their own, and have experienced a sense of cultural diffusion into different aspects apart from *Alice* as a whole, it bears investigation into Carroll's life and the original published versions of *Alice* to determine exactly what themes and what purpose lie behind and within the text, which has become my intent with this project. Though a literary analysis of *Alice* could be and has been approached from innumerable angles, the basic themes of order, chaos, justice, sanity, and isolation should be treated with the utmost respect, as I believe they are the original communication of Lewis Carroll to the reader. It is a work of fiction I have come to admire and understand greater through the course of this project, and I find myself richer and more enlightened by the journey.

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