

**Author: Carl SENNA (1984) Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Cliffs Notes.**

## 1. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Book Summary

*Abstract:* Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* drops curious young Alice down a rabbit hole and into an underground world that just gets "curiouser and curiouser." In Wonderland, Alice attempts to understand and impose logic on this illogical dream-world as she faces off against the White Rabbit, the Cheshire-Cat, the Blue Caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, and ultimately the Queen of Hearts. Though *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is sometimes referred to as nonsense literature, hidden in Carroll's wordplay are satirical jibes at the politics and propriety of Victorian England.

The novel is composed of twelve brief chapters; it can be read in an afternoon. Each of the brief chapters, furthermore, is divided into small, individual, almost isolated episodes. And the story begins with Alice and her sister sitting on the bank of a river reading a book which has no pictures or dialogue in it. ". . . and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" Thus, we find many pictures and read much dialogue (although very little of it makes sense) in *this* novel.

After introducing us to one of the creatures in Wonderland, the Gryphon, for instance, the narrator tells us, "If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture." As noted earlier, Wonderland is filled with strange animals, and Alice's encounters with these creatures, all of whom engage her in conversations, confuse her even more whenever she meets yet another inhabitant of this strange country.

Slowly losing interest in her sister's book, Alice catches sight of a white rabbit. However, he is not merely a rabbit; he will be the "White Rabbit," a major character in the novel. In this first paragraph, then, we learn about the protagonist, Alice, her age, her temperament, and the setting and the mood of the story. In a dream, Alice has escaped from the dull and boring and prosaic world of adulthood — a world of dull prose and pictureless experiences; she has entered what seems to be a confusing, but perpetual springtime of physical, if often terrifying, immediacy.

The White Rabbit wears a waistcoat, walks upright, speaks English, and is worrying over the time on his pocket watch. Alice follows him simply because she is very curious about him. And very soon she finds herself falling down a deep tunnel. For a few minutes, she is frightened; the experience of falling disorients her. Soon, however, she realizes that she is not falling fast; instead, she is falling in a slow, almost floating descent. As she falls, she notices that the tunnel walls are lined with cupboards, bookshelves, maps, and paintings. She takes a jar of orange marmalade off a shelf. But finding the jar empty, she replaces it on a lower shelf, as though she were trying to maintain a sense of some propriety — especially in this situation of absolute uncertainty. As she reflects on the marmalade jar, she says that had she dropped the jar, she might have killed someone below. Alice is clearly a self-reflective young girl — and she's also relatively calm; her thinking reveals a curiously mature mind at times. But like an ordinary little girl, she feels homesick for her cat, Dinah. In that respect, she is in sharp contrast with conventional child heroines of the time. Although Alice may be curious and sometimes bewildered, she is never *too* nice or *too* naughty. But she is always aware of her class-status as a "lady." At one point, she even fears that some of Wonderland's creatures have confused her for a servant, as when the White Rabbit thinks that she is his housekeeper, Mary Ann, and orders Alice to fetch his gloves and fan.

Thus, in Chapter I, Carroll prepares us for Alice's first major confrontation with absolute chaos. And note that Alice's literal-minded reaction to the *impossible* is always considered absurd here in Wonderland; it is laughable, yet it is her only way of coping. As she falls through the rabbit-hole, for instance, she wonders what latitude or longitude she has arrived at. This is humorous and ridiculous because such measurements — if one stops to think about it — are *meaningless* words to a seven-year-old girl, and they are certainly meaningless measurements of *anything* underground.

In Chapter II, Alice finds herself still in the long passageway, and the White Rabbit appears and goes off into a long, low hall full of locked doors. Behind one very small door, Alice remembers that there is "the loveliest garden you ever saw" (remember, she saw this in Chapter I), but now she has drunk a liquid that has made her too large to squeeze even her head through the doorway of the garden. She wishes that she could fold herself up like a telescope and enter. This wish becomes possible when she finds a shrinking potion and a key to the door. The potion reduces her to ten inches high, but she forgets to take the key with her (!) before shrinking, and now the table is too high for her to reach the key. To any young child, this is silly and something to be laughed at, but on another level, there's an element of fear; for children, the predictable proportions of things are important matters of survival. Yet here in Wonderland, things change — for no known reason — thus, logic has lost all its validity.

Then Alice eats a cake that she finds, and her neck shoots up until it resembles a giraffe's. Suddenly, she is a distorted nine feet tall! Clearly, her ability to change size has been a mixed blessing. In despair, she asks, "Who in the world am I?" This is a key question.

Meanwhile, the rapid, haphazard nature of Alice's physical and emotional changes has created a dangerous pool of tears that almost causes her to drown when she shrinks again. Why has she shrunk? She realizes that she has been holding the White Rabbit's lost white gloves and fan — therefore, it *must* be the magic of the fan that is causing her to shrink to almost nothingness. She saves herself by instantly dropping the fan. But now she is desperate; in vain, she searches her mind for something to make sense out of all this illogical chaos, something like arithmetic and geography, subjects that are solid, lasting, and rational. But even they seem to be confused because no matter how much she recites their rules, nothing helps. At the close of this chapter, she is swimming desperately in a pool of her own tears, alongside a mouse and other chattering creatures that have suddenly, somehow, appeared.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is full of parody and satire. And in Chapter III, Victorian history is Carroll's target. The mouse offers to *dry* the other creatures and Alice by telling them a *very dry* history of England. Then, Carroll attacks politics: the Dodo organizes a Caucus-race, a special race in which every participant wins a prize. Alice then learns the mouse's sad tale as Carroll's editor narrates it on the page in the shape of a mouse's very narrow, S-shaped tail. The assembled, unearthly creatures cannot accept ordinary language, and so Alice experiences, again, absolute bafflement; this is linguistic and semantic disaster. Indeed, much of the humor of this chapter is based on Alice's reactions to the collapse of three above-ground assumptions: predictable growth, an absolute distinction between animals and humans, and an identity that remains constant. We might also add to the concept of a constancy of identity a conformity of word usage. But in Wonderland, Alice's previous identity and the very concept of a permanent identity has repeatedly been destroyed, just as the principles of above-ground are contradicted everywhere; here in Wonderland, such things as space, size, and even arithmetic are shown to have *no consistent laws*.

In Chapter IV, the confusion of identity continues. The White Rabbit insists that Alice fetch him his gloves and his fan. Somehow, he thinks that Alice is his servant, and Alice, instead of objecting to his confusion, passively accepts her new role, just as she would obey an adult ordering her about above-ground. On this day when everything has gone wrong, she feels absolutely defeated.

In the rabbit's house, Alice finds and drinks another growth potion. This time, however, she becomes so enormous that she fills up the room so entirely that she can't get out. These continuing changes in size illustrate her confused, rapid identity crisis and her continuous perplexity. After repulsing the rabbit's manservant, young Bill, a Lizard (who is trying to evict her), Alice notices that pebbles that are being thrown at her through a window are turning into *cakes*. Upon eating one of them, she shrinks until she is small enough to escape the rabbit's house and hide in a thick wood.

In Chapter V, "Advice From a Caterpillar," Alice meets a rude Caterpillar; pompously and dogmatically, he states that she must keep her temper — which is even more confusing to her for she is a little irritable because she simply cannot make any *sense* in this world of Wonderland. Alice then becomes more polite, but the Caterpillar only sharpens his already very short, brusque replies. In Wonderland, there are obviously no conventional rules of etiquette. Thus, Alice's attempt at politeness and the observance of social niceties are still frustrated attempts of hers to react as well as she can to

very unconventional behavior—at least, it's certainly unconventional according to the rules that she learned above-ground.

Later, Alice suffers another bout of "giraffe's neck" from nibbling one side of the mushroom that the Caterpillar was sitting on. The effect of this spurt upward causes her to be mistaken for an egg-eating serpent by an angry, vicious pigeon.

In Chapters VI and VII, Alice meets the foul-tempered Duchess, a baby that slowly changes into a pig, the famous, grinning Cheshire-Cat, the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and the very, very sleepy Dormouse. The latter three are literally trapped (although they don't know it) in a time-warp — trapped in a *perpetual* time when tea is being forever served. Life is one long tea-party, and this episode is Carroll's assault on the notion of time. At the tea-party, it is *alwaysteatime*; the Mad Hatter's watch tells the *day* of the year, but not the *time* since it is *always* six o'clock. At this point, it is important that you notice a key aspect of Wonderland; here, *all* these creatures treat Alice (and her reactions) as though *she* is insane — and as though *they* are sane! In addition, when they are not condescending to her or severely criticizing her, the creatures continually contradict her. And Alice passively presumes the fault to be hers — in almost every case — because all of the creatures act as though their madness is normal and not at all unusual. It is the logical Alice who is the queer one. The chapter ends with Alice at last entering the garden by eating more of the mushroom that the Caterpillar was sitting on. Alice is now about a foot tall.

Chapters VIII to X introduce Alice to the most grimly evil and most irrational people (and actions) in the novel. Alice meets the sovereigns of Wonderland, who display a perversely hilarious rudeness not matched by anyone except possibly by the old screaming Duchess. The garden is inhabited by playing cards (with arms and legs and heads), who are ruled over by the barbarous Queen of Hearts. The Queen's constant refrain and response to seemingly *allsituations* is: "Off with their heads!" This beautiful garden, Alice discovers, is the Queen's private croquet ground, and the Queen matter-of-factly orders Alice to play croquet. Alice's confusion now turns to fear. Then she meets the ugly Duchess again, as well as the White Rabbit, the Cheshire-Cat, and a Gryphon introduces her to a Mock Turtle, who sings her a sad tale of his mock (empty) education; then the Mock Turtle teaches her and the Gryphon a dance called the 'Lobster-Quadrille.'" Chapters XI and XII concern the trial of the Knave of Hearts. Here, Alice plays a heroic role at the trial, and she emerges from Wonderland and awakens to reality. The last two chapters represent the overthrow of Wonderland and Alice's triumphant rebellion against the mayhem and madness that she experienced while she was lost, for awhile, in the strange world of Wonderland.

This story is characterized, first of all, by Alice's unthinking, irrational, and heedless jumping down the rabbit-hole, an act which is at once superhuman and beyond human experience — but Alice does it. And once we accept this premise, we are ready for the rest of the absurdities of Wonderland and Alice's attempts to understand it and, finally, to escape from it. Confusion begins almost immediately because Alice tries to use her world of knowledge from the adult world above-ground in order to understand this new world. Wonderland, however, is a lawless world of deepest, bizarre dream unconsciousness, and Alice's journey through it is a metaphorical search for experience. What she discovers in her dream, though, is a more meaningful and terrifying world than most conscious acts of intelligence would ever lead her to. Hence, "Who in the world am I?" is Alice's constant, confused refrain, one which people "above-ground" ask themselves many, many times throughout their lifetimes.

Throughout the story, Alice is confronted with the problem of shifting identity, as well as being confronted with the anarchy and by the cruelty of Wonderland. When Alice physically shrinks in size, she is never really small enough to hide from the disagreeable creatures that she meets; yet when she grows to adult or to even larger size, she is still not large enough to command authority. "There are things in *Alice*," writes critic William Empson, "that would give Freud the creeps." Often we find poor Alice (and she is often described as being either "poor" or "curious") in tears over something that the adult reader finds comic. And "poor Alice" is on the verge of tears most of the time. When she rarely prepares to laugh, she is usually checked by the morbid, humorless types of creatures whom she encounters in Wonderland. Not even the smiling Cheshire-Cat is kind to her. Such a hostile

breakdown of the ordinary world is *never* funny to the child, however comic it might appear to adults. But then Wonderland would not be so amusing to us except in terms of its sheer, unabated madness.

One of the central concerns of *Alice* is the subject of growing up — the anxieties and the mysteries of personal identity as one matures. When Alice finds her neck elongated, everything, in her words, becomes "queer"; again, *she is uncertain who she is*. As is the case with most children, Alice's identity depends upon her control of her body. Until now, Alice's life has been very structured; now her life shifts; it becomes fragmented until it ends with a nightmarish awakening. Throughout the novel, Alice is filled with unconscious feelings of morbidity, physical disgrace, unfairness, and bizarre feelings about bodily functions. Everywhere there is the absurd, unexplainable notion of death and the absolute meaninglessness of death and life.

Alice's final triumph occurs when she outgrows nonsense. In response to the Queen's cry at the Knave's trial: "sentence first — verdict afterward," Alice responds: "Stuff and nonsense! Who cares for *you*? You're nothing but a pack of cards!" At last, Alice takes control of her life and her growth toward maturity by shattering and scattering the absurdity of the playing cards and the silly little creatures who are less rational than she is. In waking from her nightmare, she realizes that reason *can* oppose nonsense, and that it can — and did — win. And now that the dream of chaos is over, she can say, from her distance above-ground, "It *was* a curious dream," but then she skips off thinking that — for a strange moment — what a wonderful dream it was.

## 2. About *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

*Alice* was the work of a mathematician and logician who wrote as both a humorist and as a limerist. The story was in no sense intended to be didactic; its only purpose was to entertain. One may look for Freudian or Jungian interpretations if one chooses to do so, but in the final analysis, the story functions as comedy, with dialogue used largely for Carroll to play on words, mixing fantasy with burlesque actions.

The success of *Alice* (1865) enabled Carroll to forego his activities as a deacon. After the death of his deeply religious father in 1868, Carroll was able to propose a one-third cut in his salary as a mathematical lecturer. His most famous mathematical work, *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*, had been published the year before, and in 1881, he proposed to resign his academic post so that he could give full time to writing and pursuing mathematical studies. But in 1882, he was made Curator of the Common Room and was persuaded to remain there until 1892. He continued to write on mathematical topics and completed the first volume of his *Symbolic Logic*. By then, he was independently wealthy as a result of his many successful publications: *Phantasmagoria* appeared in 1869; in 1871, *Through the Looking Glass* came out; in 1876, *The Hunting of the Snark* appeared; and in 1883, *Rhyme and Reason* was published. Carroll's university responsibilities broadened in those years and from time to time he even accepted a request for a sermon. Though his authorship of the *Alice* books was well known, he absolutely shunned *all* publicity and refused to acknowledge any connection to "Lewis Carroll."

After leaving Oxford, Carroll settled into his sister's house in Guildford. And there he died in the afternoon of January 14, 1898. His memory is preserved in a perpetual endowment of a cot in the Children's Hospital, Great Ormond Street, London. In the long run, his books for children, especially the *Alice* books, have taken their place as books worthy of serious study of English literature. Thus, almost ironically, the so-called nonsense writer's achievements are timeless and unchallengeable, and the fame of *Alice* endures. To fully appreciate *Alice*, one must keep in mind that the whole is simpler than its parts, and that although it was written originally for children, *Alice* has become a favorite adult piece of literature, a critical and philosophical work, rich in multiple meanings. More scholars (particularly economists and mathematicians) seem to allude to the *Alice* books with each passing day. The broad appeal of *Alice*, then, certainly lends substance to the notion that *Alice* and the novel are, ultimately, what you make of them. But there is some question as to whether children enjoy the puzzlement found in the story's episodes more than the story itself. In any case, children do not need critical information to appreciate *Alice*. The philosophical allusions and psychological implications are for adult tastes.

As a work of fiction, *Alice* lacks the conventional story line that we normally associate with a coherent, unified tale. Yet reading *Alice* does not leave us with a sense of incompleteness; *Alice* is far more than merely a series of disconnected episodes. In fact, *Alice* is told in the form of a dream; it is the story of Alice's dream, told in the third person point-of-view. Because Carroll chose a dream as the structure for his story, he was free to make fun of and satirize the multitudes of standard Victorian didactic maxims in children's literature. *Alice* lacks a "morally good" heroine and meaning; instead of Carroll's making an ethical point about each of her adventures (and showing how "good little girls" should behave in a situation just described), *Alice* parodies the instructive, solemn verse which filled Victorian children's books, verses which children were made to *memorize* and *recite*.

*Alice*, however, is not intended to *instruct* children in points of religion, morality, etiquette, and growing up to be mature, reasonable adults. In this novel, conventional "rationality" is replaced by the bizarre, fantastic irrationalities of a dream world. From episode to episode, Alice never progresses to any *rational* understanding or mental or psychological growth. Her adventures are *not* ordered; they are disordered. They are shifting and unpredictable, and there is always the menace of Gothic horror laced with the fantasies of Carroll's fairy tale. Indeed, Alice's dream sometimes has the aspects of a nightmare.

Wonderland is a world of wonders, a world where fairy or elf-like creatures and humans meet and talk with one another. Wonderland is a world where a baby is transformed into a pig; it is a place where a Cheshire-Cat keeps disappearing and reappearing, until only his grin remains — and even that

suddenly disappears! Wonderland is a kingdom in which the Queen and King of Hearts have subjects who are a deck of cards, and where *all* the animals (except the pig/baby) have the nagging, whining, complaining, and peevish attitudes of adults. It is as though Carroll were trying to frustrate *logical* communication and trying to turn extraordinary events into what would seem like very ordinary events in Wonderland. The only laws in *Alice* seem to be the laws of chaos; all is nonsensical. Yet, one of the novel's key focuses is on the relationship between the development of a child's language and the physical growth of the child. In Wonderland, illogical and irrational Wonderland, sudden size change has a distorting psychological effect on Alice, and this is made even more mysterious by the verbal nonsense that accompanies it. This dream magic mesmerizes children, and it makes them laugh. Most adults do not. To break a law of logic is serious business to adults; children, however, love the wildly improbable.

In any case, most of the humor in *Alice* is due to the fact that the reader has the privileged knowledge that Alice is *dreaming*; thus, she *should not* assume that anything in Wonderland should function as it does in the real world. Wonderland is a sort of reverse utopia, a decadent, corrupted one.

Many years ago, Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget demonstrated that children learn in stages and that before a certain mental age, a child will not be able to comprehend certain *abstract* relationships. Carroll seems to have already grasped this principle and is playing with the notion in this novel. Alice changes in size, but she *never matures*. The solemn adult creatures whom she meets speak to her, but what they say to her seems like absolute nonsense — that is, Carroll was satirizing the pseudo-intellectuality of adults in the Victorian world he saw all around him. And part of Alice's problem is that none of the nonsense *ever* makes sense; she never learns *anything*, even when she physically grows, or wanders through Wonderland's garden meeting people and creatures.

She grows nine feet tall after eating a cake in the opening chapter, yet she remains a child. Presumably, Alice would have continued to be baffled forever, so long as she remained in Wonderland. She is trapped in the midst of a vacuous condition, without beginning or end, without resolution.

### 3. Lewis Carroll Biography

#### Life and Work

Of all Lewis Carroll's major works, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has a unique standing in the category of whimsical, nonsense literature. Much has been written about how this novel contrasts with the vast amount of strict, extremely moralistic children's literature. This is true; *Alice* is quite different from all other Victorian children's literature. Yet, as odd as this story appears in relation to the other Victorian children's stories, this short novel is odder still because it was written by an extremely upright, ultra-conservative man — in short, a quintessential Victorian gentleman.

Lewis Carroll was born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson on January 27, 1832, in the parsonage of Daresbury, Cheshire, England, the third child and eldest son of eleven children of Reverend Charles Dodgson and his wife, Francis Jane Lutwidge. The parents were descended from two ancient and distinguished North Country families. From the Dodgsons, the son inherited a very old tradition of service to the Church and a tradition that he belonged to one of the most respected lineages in England — for example, family legend has it that King James I actually "knighted" either a loin of beef or mutton at the table of Sir Richard Houghton, one of Carroll's ancestors. This incident has been thought by some critics to have inspired the introductory lines in *Through the Looking Glass*, the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, when the Red Queen introduces the leg of mutton to Alice: "Alice — Mutton: Mutton — Alice."

For the sake of those who are curious about pen names and how authors choose one over another, "Lewis Carroll" is an interesting example. While teaching at Christ Church, Oxford, Charles Dodgson (Carroll) wrote comic literature and parodies for a humorous paper, *The Train*. The first of the several pieces submitted to *The Train* was signed "B. B." It was so popular that the editor asked Dodgson to use a proper nom de plume; at first, Dodgson proposed "Dares," after his birthplace, Daresbury. The editor thought that the name was too journalistic, so after struggling over a number of choices, Dodgson wrote to his editor and suggested a number of variations and anagrams, based on the letters of his actual name. "Lewis Carroll" was finally decided on, derived from a rearrangement of most of the letters in the name "Charles Lutwidge Dodgson." Clearly, Carroll was fascinated with anagrams, and he will use them throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; his interest in anagrams also explains much about the writings in his later life, and his mathematical works. Concerning Carroll, one cannot safely exclude any influence, least of all hereditary ones, but a good case can be made for the formative effect of Carroll's father on him. Those who knew Reverend Dodgson said that he was a pious and gloomy man, almost devoid of any sense of humor. Yet from his letters to his son, there is recorded evidence of a *remarkable* sense of fun. For example, in one letter to his son, he speaks of screaming in the middle of a street:

Iron-mongers-Iron-mongers — Six hundred men will rush out of their shops in a moment — fly, fly, in all screwdriver, & a ring, & if they are not brought directly, in forty seconds I will leave nothing but one small cat alive in the whole town of Leeds, & I shall only leave that because I shall not have time to kill it.

To a boy of eight, such correspondence from his father must have greatly heightened his later love for literary exaggeration; indeed, such fanciful letters may have been the genesis for Carroll's so-called nonsense books.

As we noted, Reverend Dodgson was said to be an austere, puritanical, and authoritarian Victorian man; Lewis Carroll's mother, however, was the essence of the Victorian "gentlewoman." As described by her son, she was "one of the sweetest and gentlest women that had ever lived, whom to know was to love." The childhood of Lewis Carroll was relatively pleasant, full of ideas and hobbies that contributed to his future creative works. His life at Daresbury was secluded, though, and his playmates were mostly his brothers and sisters. Class distinctions did not permit much socializing between children of the parsonage and the "lesser" parish children. Curiously, a number of the Dodgson children, including Carroll, stammered severely. More than one author has suggested that, at least in Carroll's case, his stammer may have arisen from his parents' attempts to correct his left-handedness. Isa Bowman, a childhood friend of Carroll's, has said that whenever adults approached them on their walks, Carroll's speech became extremely difficult to understand. Apparently, he panicked; his

shyness and stammering always seemed worse when he was in the world of adults. This stammering made him into a bit of a "loner" and explains, somewhat, Carroll's longtime fascination with puzzles and anagrams, solitary games to amuse himself. It was as though the long suppressed, left-handed self endured in the fanciful, literary adult Carroll — in contrast to the very stern adult librarian, mathematics lecturer, deacon, dormitory master, and curator of the dining hall. Carroll was, seemingly, the archetype of the left-handed man in a right-handed world, like his own White Knight in *Through the Looking Glass* (the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*).

And now if ever by chance I put  
My fingers into glue  
Or madly squeeze a right-hand foot  
Into a left-hand shoe . . .

Carroll's fondness for games, language puzzles, and the world of the bizarre is further demonstrated in his flair for amusing his brothers and sisters — especially his sisters, which explains, perhaps, his lifelong attraction for little girls. In fact, a great deal of Carroll's childhood was spent taking care of his little sisters. At home, it was he who was in charge of these seven sisters, and his imagination was constantly being exercised in order to entertain them. In one of his fanciful story games that he invented, he imagined a sort of "railway game," and as one of the rules of the game, at least *three* trains had to run over the passengers in order for the passengers to be attended to by physicians. Fortunately, though, rarely were Carroll's amusements cruel, and when the family moved to the Croft Rectory, Yorkshire, where Carroll's father assumed the Archdeaconry, Carroll wrote, directed, and performed light, gay plays, and he also manipulated puppets and marionettes for his family and friends.

In addition to the plays that Carroll wrote and the scripts that he composed for his puppet theater, he also wrote poems, stories, and humorous sketches for his own "magazines." In his "Useful and Instructive Poetry" magazine, for example, a volume that was composed for a younger brother and a sister, he satirized a copybook of stern, dogmatic maxims (a typical Victorian children's book), and in this poem, he alluded to his own handicap:

Learn well your grammar  
And never stammer.  
Eat bread with butter;  
Once more, don't stutter.

Other poems in the volume focus on the theme of fairy tales, an interest which played a large part in the creation of *Alice*. An early poem of Carroll's, for instance, "My Fairy," suggests the contrariness of the creatures that Alice will meet in Wonderland:

I have a fairy by my side  
Which cried; it said, "You must not weep.  
"If, full of mirth, I smile and grin,  
It says, "You must not laugh."  
When once I wished to drink some gin,  
It said, "You must not quaff."

Similarly, in another early poem, "A Tale of a Tail," there is a drawing of a dog's very long tail, suggestive of the very slender, increasingly smaller mouse's tail in *Alice*, which coils across a single page in a sort of S-shape. Also, an early poem about someone falling off a wall anticipates Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, and a "Morals" essay reminds one of the ridiculous conversations between the ugly Duchess and the evil Queen in *Alice*. It is difficult to ignore the writings of Carroll as a child in any analysis of his works, for in his childhood productions, we find conclusive evidence of early imitations, hints, allusions, suggestions, and actual elements of imaginary creatures, dreams, and visions that will appear in his later works.

## **Education**

All his life, Carroll was a scholar; when he was not a student, he was a teacher, and until two years before his death, he was firmly imbedded in the life of Oxford University. Quite honestly, though,

nothing very exciting ever happened in Carroll's life, apart from a trip to the Continent, including Russia. His vacations were all local ones, to his sister's home in Guildford, his aunt's home in Hastings, and to Eastbourne, the Lake Country, and Wales. He did not begin his formal schooling until the age of twelve, when he enrolled in Richmond Grammar School, ten miles from the Croft Rectory, but he had already received a thorough background in literature from the family library. Yet it was mathematics — and not English literature — that interested Carroll most. When he was very young, for example, Carroll implored his father to explain logarithms to him, presumably because he had already mastered arithmetic, algebra, and even most of Euclidian geometry.

Carroll entered Rugby in 1846, but the sensitive young child found the all-boys environment highly unpleasant; the bullying abuse, the flogging, and the caning was a daily part of school life. Nonetheless, Carroll was, despite his three years of unhappiness there, an exceedingly studious boy, and he won many prizes for academic excellence.

Carroll matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1851, and remained there for forty-seven years. But, two days after entering Oxford, he received word of his mother's death, something which deeply distressed him and seemed to have worsened his stammering. By all accounts, Carroll was not an outgoing student; with little money, and because of his stammer, his circle of friends always remained small. Yet in his academic work, he applied himself with the same energy and devotion that characterized his career at Rugby. He won scholarship prizes, honors in Classical exams, and also won a First Prize in Mathematics. His scholastic efforts were rewarded by a lifetime fellowship and a residency at Christ Church, so long as he remained unmarried and proceeded to take Holy Orders.

In 1854, the year Carroll took his B.A. degree, he began publishing poetry in the student magazines and in *The Whitby Gazette*. Carroll's writings had already established him as both a superb raconteur and humorist at Oxford, and in 1854, he began to seriously teach himself how to express his thoughts in proper literary form; it was at that time that his writings began to show some of the whimsy and fantasy that are contained in the *Alice* books.

In 1857, Carroll took his M.A. degree and was made "Master of the House." During those years, he immersed himself in literature, mathematics, and also in the London theater. He produced freelance humorous prose pieces and verses for various periodicals, explored theories of dual identities, wrote satires, published mathematical and symbolic logic texts, invented word games and puzzles, and took up photography, a hobby that would make him famous as one of the best Victorian photographers. In short, Carroll became a sort of lesser English equivalent of Leonardo da Vinci. He invented the Nyctograph, a device for writing in the dark, and he also invented a method of remote control self-photography. Helmut Gernsheim, the author of *Lewis Carroll: Photographer*, calls Carroll's photographic achievements "astonishing"; in his estimation, Carroll "must not only rank as a pioneer of British amateur photography, but I would also unhesitatingly acclaim him as the most outstanding photographer of children in the nineteenth century."

### **Carroll's Interest in Little Girls**

In every study of Carroll's life, one finds that Carroll had only the most formal encounters with mature women. There was seemingly no romantic interest in adult women. Some biographers have attributed this asexual interest to Carroll's stammering and his self-conscious shyness about it. On the other hand, Carroll's diaries and contemporary accounts about him are full of his encounters with children, nearly always with little girls. He obviously delighted in the company of little girls twelve years old and younger, and his diary records in great detail the aesthetic pleasure that he took in viewing "nice little children." Carroll's attractions for little girls were honorable and above reproach — at least we have, almost a century later, absolutely no evidence to the contrary.

Carroll's interest in discovering new little girls for his photographic studio seems to have amounted to his discovering hundreds, perhaps thousands, of girls in his lifetime. And in nearly every recorded case, Carroll produced a masterpiece of character study. His photographs are filled with unusually sensitive and candid "personalities" of the subjects. They caught the essence of human beings; they were not merely stiff, embalmed-like "objects." Occasionally, there is an extraordinary sense of straightforward eroticism — but it is straightforward; it is not murky or perverted. And in nearly every recorded case, Carroll had the full approbation of the child's parents, and invariably his work was

chaperoned, at least indirectly. Had there been any intimacies between Carroll and his young female subjects, it would long ago have been ferreted out by the multitude of Freudian-oriented literary critics.

Today, we can understand why, occasionally, certain people thought Carroll's photographs to be erotic. Most people now, however, wouldn't consider them to be. His photographs are alluring; they look as if they almost could speak. They all have a provocative quality about them. But, they are "safe," and as we view them, they help us to understand Carroll's interest in seeing children as *his* own personal, private, peculiar *escape* from mature sex.

### **Alice Liddell**

In 1846, Carroll met Alice Liddell, the four-year-old daughter of Dean Henry George Liddell of Christ Church. Carroll had already established himself as a close friend of Alice's elder sister and cousin. But it is Alice who figures most prominently in Carroll's most famous creation, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

On July 4, 1852, Carroll and a friend, Rev. Robinson Duckworth, took the Liddell children, Lorina (13), Alice (10), and Edith (8) on a boat ride (a row boat) up the Isis River (the local name for the Thames River). As they made their way upstream, Carroll began telling a story about the underground adventures of a little girl named Alice. According to Duckworth, the story "was actually composed and spoken over my shoulder for the benefit of Alice Liddell, who was acting as 'cox' of our gig. I remember turning around and saying, 'Dodgson, is this an extempore romance of yours?' And he replied, 'Yes, I'm inventing as we go along.'"

Upon disembarking, Alice asked Carroll to write out Alice's adventures for her, and Carroll promised to do so by the following Christmas, but the work was not completed until February 10, 1863. By that time, Alice was eleven, and Carroll was no longer seeing her with the regularity that he used to. Now he had made a new friend, the famous ingénue Ellen Terry, who was nearly seventeen. His interest in Ellen Terry is the closest relationship that Carroll had with an adult woman, apart from his family, of course.

From an initial length of 18,000 words, Carroll's manuscript expanded to 35,000 words, and the famous English illustrator John Tenniel read it and consented to draw illustrations for it. As Carroll searched for a publisher, he gave anxious thoughts to a perfect title. Various ones came to him: *Alice's Golden Hour*, *Alice's Hour in Elf-land*, *Alice Among the Elves*, *Alice's Doings in Elf-land*, and *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. Finally, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was chosen, and Macmillan, the publishers for Oxford University, agreed to publish the book on a commission basis.

*Alice* was an immediate critical success when it appeared in 1865. *The Reader* magazine called it "a glorious artistic treasure . . . a book to put on one's shelf as an antidote to a fit of the blues." *The Pall Mall Gazette* wrote that "this delightful little book is a children's feast and a triumph of nonsense." About 180,000 copies of *Alice* in various editions were sold in England during Carroll's lifetime; by 1911, there were almost 700,000 copies in print. Since then, with the expiration of the original copyright in 1907, the book has been translated into every major language, and now it has become a perennial bestseller, ranking with the works of Shakespeare and the Bible in popular demand. In the words of the critic Derek Hudson: "The most remarkable thing about *Alice* is that, though it springs from the very heart of the Victorian period, it is timeless in its appeal. This is a characteristic that it shares with other classics — a small band — that have similarly conquered the world."

#### 4. Critical Essays: *Alice as a Character*

Alice is reasonable, well-trained, and polite. From the start, she is a miniature, middle-class Victorian "lady." Considered in this way, she is the perfect foil, or counterpoint, or contrast, for all the unsocial, bad-mannered eccentrics whom she meets in Wonderland. Alice's constant resource and strength is her courage. Time and again, her dignity, her directness, her conscientiousness, and her art of conversation *all* fail her. But when the chips are down, Alice reveals something to the Queen of Hearts — that is: spunk! Indeed, Alice has all the Victorian virtues, including a quaint capacity for rationalization; yet it is Alice's *common sense* that makes the quarrelsome Wonderland creatures seem perverse in spite of what they consider to be their "adult" identities.

Certainly, Alice fits no conventional stereotype; she is neither angel nor brat. She simply has an overwhelming curiosity, but it is matched by restraint and moderation. She is balanced in other ways, too. To control her growth and shrinking, she only "samples" the cake labeled "EAT ME." And never is there a hint that she would seek to use her size advantage to control her fate and set dictatorial rules of behavior for Wonderland. The Caterpillar takes offense when she complains of being three inches tall. And the Duchess is unreasonable, coarse, and brutal. But in each case, their veneer of "civility" is either irrational or transparent. The Caterpillar finds mirth in teasing Alice with his pointed, formal, verb games, and the rude Duchess mellows into a corrupt "set of silly rules." Yet, behind their playfulness, Alice senses resentment and rage. It is not so much that Alice is kept "simple" so as to throw into relief the monstrous aspects of Wonderland characters. Rather, it is that Alice, as she conceives of her personality in a dream, *sees herself* as simple, sweet, innocent, and confused.

Some critics feel that Alice's personality and her waking life are reflected in Wonderland; that may be the case. But the story itself is independent of Alice's "real world." Her personality, as it were, stands alone in the story, and it must be considered in terms of the Alice character in Wonderland.

A strong moral consciousness operates in all of Alice's responses to Wonderland, yet on the other hand, she exhibits a child's insensitivity in discussing her cat Dinah with the frightened Mouse in the pool of tears. Generally speaking, Alice's simplicity owes a great deal to Victorian feminine passivity and a repressive domestication. Slowly, in stages, Alice's reasonableness, her sense of responsibility, and her other good qualities will emerge in her journey through Wonderland and, especially, in the trial scene. Her list of virtues is long: curiosity, courage, kindness, intelligence, courtesy, humor, dignity, and a sense of justice. She is even "maternal" with the pig/baby. But her constant and universal human characteristic is simple wonder — something which all children (and the child that still lives in most adults) can easily identify with.

## 5. Critical Essays: Themes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* provides an inexhaustible mine of literary, philosophical, and scientific themes. Here are some general themes which the reader may find interesting and of some use in studying the work.

Alice's initial reaction after falling down the rabbit-hole is one of extreme loneliness. Her curiosity has led her into a kind of Never-Never Land, over the edge of Reality and into a lonely, very alien world. She is further lost when she cannot establish her identity. Physically, she is lost; psychologically, she also feels lost. She cannot get her recitations right, and she becomes even more confused when her arithmetic (a subject she believed to be unchanging and solid) fails her. Every attempt to establish a familiar basis of identity creates only the sense of being lost — absolutely lost. Alice becomes, to the reader, a mistreated, misunderstood, wandering waif. Trapped in solitude, she finds herself lapsing into soliloquies that reflect a divided, confused, and desperate self.

### **The Child-Swain**

Alice is the most responsible "character" in the story; in fact, she is the only real person and the only "true" character. At most, the other creatures are antagonists, either a bit genial or cruel, depending on how they treat Alice at any given point in the story. Alice's innocence makes her a perfect vehicle of social criticism à la *Candide*. In her encounters, we see the charmingly pathetic ingénue — a child whose only purpose is to escape the afflictions around her. By implication, there is the view that a child's perception of the world is the only sane one. Conversely, to grow and mature leads to inevitable corruption, to sexuality, emotionalism, and adult hypocrisy. The child as an innocent, sympathetic object has obvious satirical utility, but only to the point that the child must extend sympathy herself — and Alice fails to do this when she describes her cat Dinah to the Mouse, and later when she confesses to having eaten eggs to the frightened mother pigeon.

### **Children and Animals**

In an age such as our own, where philosophers earnestly debate the rights of animals, or whether machines can "think," we cannot escape the child's affinity for animals. And in *Wonderland*, except for the Gryphon, none of the animals are of a hostile nature that might lead Alice to any harm. (And the Gryphon is a mythical animal so he doesn't count as a "true" animal.) Most of the *Wonderland* animals are the kind one finds in middle-class homes, pet shops, and in children's cartoons. Although they may not seem so in behavior, most of them are, really, pets. Alice feels a natural identity with them, but her relationship ultimately turns on her viewing them as adults. So her identity with the animals has a lot to do with her size in relationship to adults. Alice emphasizes this point when she observes that some ugly children might be improved if they were pigs. In her observation lies the acceptance of a common condition of children and animals: Each is personified to a degree. Thus, it is not surprising that in the world of the child, not only animals, but dolls, toys, plants, insects, and even playing cards have the potential to be personified by children (or adults).

### **Death**

Growing up in *Wonderland* means the death of the child, and although Alice certainly remains a child through her physical changes in size — in other ways, death never seems to be far away in *Wonderland*. For example, death is symbolized by the White Rabbit's fan which causes Alice to almost vanish; death is implied in the discussion of the Caterpillar's metamorphosis. And death permeates the morbid atmosphere of the "enchanted garden." The Queen of Hearts seems to be the Goddess of Death, always yelling her single, barbarous, indiscriminate, "Off with their heads!"

### **Nonsense**

One of the key characteristics of Carroll's story is his use of language. Much of the "nonsense" in *Alice* has to do with transpositions, either of mathematical scale (as in the scene where Alice multiplies incorrectly) or in the scrambled verse parodies (for example, the Father William poem). Much of the nonsense effect is also achieved by directing conversation to parts of speech rather than to the meaning of the speakers — to definitions rather than to indications. When Alice asks the Cheshire-Cat which way to go, he replies that she should, first, know where she's going. The Frog-Footman tells

her not to knock on the door outside the Duchess' house; he can only open the door when he is inside (though Alice, of course, manages to open the door from the outside). And some of the nonsense in Wonderland is merely satirical, such as the Mock Turtle's education. But the nature of nonsense is much like chance, and rules to decipher it into logical meaning or sense patterns work against the principal intent of Carroll's purpose — that is, he wanted his nonsense to be random, senseless, unpredictable, and without rules.

### **Nature and Nurture**

The structure of a dream does not lend itself to resolution. A dream simply is a very different kind of "experience." In this sense, Alice does not really evolve into a higher understanding of her adventure. She has the memory of Wonderland but she brings nothing "real" from Wonderland — only her memory of it. This is a powerful testament to the influence of her domestication. In Alice's case, good social breeding is more important than her natural disposition. But if Alice leaves Wonderland without acquiring any lasting, truly worthwhile knowledge, neither can she give any wisdom to the creatures whom she has met there. Nature, in each case, sets limits on the ability to assimilate experiences.

In the Caucus-race, for instance, the race depicts the absurdity of democracy. Yet, Alice's critical attitude — a product of her class education — is also satirized. The object of the race is to have everyone dry off; so it doesn't matter who wins or loses, and clearly the outcome of the race is irrelevant. To think otherwise, as Alice does, is absurd. The point of the running about is to dry off, which, incidentally, makes it equally absurd to call moving about for that purpose a "race."

Wonderland offers a peculiar view of Nature. For one thing, all the animals have obviously been educated. There is literally not a "stupid" one in the bunch (unless it is the puppy or the pig/baby). In general, the basic condition common to all the creatures is not ignorance — but madness, for which there seems to be no appropriate remedy. A Victorian reader must have wondered how the animals were "trained"; after all, the assumptions that Alice makes all rest on her "training." On this point, however, the reader can only speculate.

In Wonderland, much of the fun depends on the confusion of "training." Nature and natural feelings seem to more often than not mean danger or potential violence. (But except for the puppy and the pig/baby, there are no natural creatures, however much natural feelings are expressed.) The Duchess, for example, seems to be only the epitome of rage; she conveys a kind of sadistic delight in digging her chin into Alice's shoulder; anger even seems to motivate her didactic morals (that is, "Flamingoes and mustard both bite").

Finally, nature seems superior to nurture in Wonderland, as the personification of beasts seems to be no improvement on the actual beasts themselves. The pig, for example, is a more content creature as a pig, for the baby was not happier when it was a baby.

### **Justice**

Although there are plenty of "rules," the laws of Wonderland seem a parody of real justice. The Queen of Hearts, for example, thinks nothing of violating the law which protects people from illegal prosecution; she seeks the head of the Knave of Hearts for having been only accused of stealing the tarts. Thus, the Queen violates the spirit of the law against stealing to satisfy the logical necessity that every trial must have an execution. The spirit of the law is, so to speak, sacrificed to satisfy the reversibility of the symbolic letter of her logic. In the croquet game, anyone can be executed for reasons known only to the sovereign Queen, who acts as though she is a divinity with the power to take or give life. Under a monarchy, the monarchs are above the law. In Wonderland, however, the monarch's will is flaunted when the command is to execute someone. Ignoring the Queen's command to behead someone is a matter of survival as well as justice.

The trial of the Knave of Hearts satirizes both too much law and law by personal edict. Someone may have stolen the tarts, and it may well have been the Knave. But the offense is trivial, and the sentence is only a joke. One of the problems with the law in any context is its application. When the law ceases to promote harmony, then its purpose as a regulator of human affairs is subverted. In Wonderland the idea of a law seems ridiculous because the operative principle of Wonderland is chaos. Injustice, then, is a logical consequence of living in Wonderland. The rule of the strongest person must be the law —

that is, the law of anarchy. The trial of the Knave is proof of this woeful state of affairs. Fortunately, Alice is the strongest of the lot, and she overthrows the cruel Queen's sentence of execution and the savage kangaroo court. There is no way to change the law because no "law" exists. By her rebellion, Alice serves both the cause of sanity and justice.

### **Time and Space**

Time, in the sense of duration, exists in Wonderland only in a psychological and artistic sense. When we ordinarily conceive of time, we think of units of duration — that is, hours, minutes, and seconds; or days, weeks, months, and years. We may also think of getting older and having lived from a certain date. We assume that the time reflected on a clock and our age are essentially the same kind of process. But a clock may repeat its measure of duration, whereas we have only one lifetime. Our age is therefore a function of an irreversible psychological sense of duration. We live in the conscious knowledge that we can never return to a given point in the past, as we might adjust a clock for daylight savings time. Our personal, psychological time is absolute and irreversible. And that is the kind of time that creatures like the Mad Hatter employ in Wonderland. (We never know whether the White Rabbit uses a mechanistic time, only that he has a watch.)

When Alice looks at the Mad Hatter's watch, she sees a date, but she sees neither hours nor minutes. Because Time and the Mad Hatter do not get along, Time has "frozen" the tea-party at six o'clock. But it turns out that time is also reversed so that a year has the duration of an hour and vice versa. Reckoned in hour-lengths, the tea-party must go on for at least a year (unless Time and the Mad Hatter make up their quarrel). But because of psychological time, the creatures are able to leave and return to the tea-party. And because of psychological time, Wonderland's experience comes to an end, and just as our uniquely, individual lives will one day end, so will our nightmares and dreams.

### **Source**

Senna, C. (1984) Cliffs Notes on Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Retrieved on 7 Apr 2011 from [http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study\\_guide/literature/id-202.html](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/id-202.html).