

Alice, villain or victim:  
a study of alice in  
wonderland and its  
1951 film adapta...



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In the famously popular novel *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll expresses themes of chaos, fantasy, and violence, all of which raise important questions throughout the novel. However, in the many film adaptations of the story, some of these themes are lost or manipulated to create a different meaning. Disney's 1951 version of "*Alice in Wonderland*" follows fairly closely to the story of Alice's time in Wonderland, keeping the themes of violence and disorder but changing the context. The alterations made manage to replace Carroll's original Alice for a much more docile version. This change of character is such a drastic one due to the emphasis of Alice's violence in the novel; by removing this part of her character, Alice becomes a new person, thus changing the interpretation of Wonderland and the overall meaning of the novel.

One of Alice's largest representations to her violence in the novel is shown in her relationship to her cat, Dinah, who she uses to terrify and threaten the characters of Wonderland. This is extremely prevalent with her conversation with the Mouse, where she continues to bring up her pet cat Dinah to the rodent. In this conversation, Alice begins describing her pet who "sits purring so nicely by the fire, licking her paws and washing her face—and she is such a nice thing to nurse—and she's such a capitol one for catching mice—oh, I beg your pardon!" Alice catches her faux pas too late and frightens the Mouse with the idea of a hunting cat (pg 21). In attempts to lighten the conversation with a discussion of her neighbor's dog and help take the Mouse's mind off of Dinah, Alice manages to repeat her mistake again, "... and it'll fetch things when you throw them, and it'll sit up and beg for its dinner, and all sorts of things—I can't remember half of them—and it belongs

to a farmer, you know, and he says it's so useful, it's worth a hundred pounds! He says it kills all the rats and—oh dear!" (pg 22). This inability to control herself around the Mouse and repeatedly bringing the conversation back to these animals' primal instinct shows Alice's own fascination with violence. She does this again as she joins the Mouse along with another group of birds, where she discusses Dinah, "for she was always ready to talk about her pet: "Dinah's our cat. And she's such a capital one for catching mice, you can't think! And oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she'll eat a little bird as soon as look at it!" (pg 29). The ferocity of Dinah is lost in Disney's adaptation, where what we see of the cat is in Alice's opening song, "In a World of My Own". In the film, we have a much different depiction of Alice's fierce, terrorizing carnivore, and instead, is a sweet, fluffy kitten complete with a pink bow tied around its neck. This image of Alice's now innocent cat ensures the audience that it couldn't pose any threat to the creatures of Wonderland, which seems to recreate the desired effect of Alice.

Disney wants to enforce this idea of femininity and passivity where Alice is playing the victim. The audience also loses this entire interaction with the Mouse in Disney's movie with the whole scene removed from the storyline. By removing both parts of this novel from the movie, Alice loses any traits that would have any inclination towards a violent nature, allowing her to Alice to become more victimized and likeable. Alice's fascination with the disturbing and sinister comes out in the novel in subtle ways, helping the readers subconsciously build this awareness of her malicious tendencies. When Alice is just entering Wonderland and we haven't had a chance to see her real character, she lingers on the idea of physical harm longer than one

would think necessary. As Alice encounters the liquid labelled, “ drink me”, she decides to see if it is marked ‘ poison’ “ for she had read several nice stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that if you cut your finger very deeply with a knife; it usually bleeds; and that, if you drink much from a bottle marked “ poison,” it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.” (pg 13). This passage in itself reveals a great deal about Alice. Noticing certain diction, Alice describes these gruesome stories as “ nice” which seems a little light-hearted for the content of her stories. She also explains that if these victims had followed certain rules, they wouldn’t be hurt, which seems that Alice feels these victims deserve the consequences they receive. Going into Alice’s description of the tales, she seems to dwell on the more grisly details which isn’t particularly normal for a young girl of the 19th century. This attribute of Alice is not revealed in the movie at all, and in fact this particular quotation is almost altogether cut from the movie. By making a point to encourage the image of a helpless version of Alice in this scene, Alice only says that she is to look at the label and make sure it doesn’t say “ poisoned”. This image of Alice is also achieved through the creation of the character the Doorknob, who while completely absent from the novel, allows Alice to be more childish and victimized by having to explain everything to her and not allowing her to figure things out for herself as she did in the novel.

Alice's interest and involvement in violence isn't only in regards to inflicting it on other's either. In the novel, as Alice stresses over the ever-changing growth from the biscuit and drink, she becomes upset and begins to cry. Rather than consoling however, Alice lectures herself, "Come, there's no use in crying like that!" said Alice to herself rather sharply. "I advise you to leave off this minute!" She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself..." (pg 14). Not only does Alice occasionally scold herself to the point of crying, but she also has hurt herself in corporal punishment for cheating herself in a game of croquet. This is extremely interesting in regard to Alice's character, because so far in the novel we have no reason to see any remorse or guilt in her behavior, but we have several hints to her violent nature, so in following Alice's character traits, we see her using discipline as a way to experiment with her own sadistic interests. Once again, we see this subtracted from Disney's plot, and are only given the tears of a confused and overgrown Alice that has no violent qualities that we see. A part of the novel where we are witness to violence on both a giving and a receiving end by Alice is when she once again becomes overgrown and is stuck in the Rabbit's house. As Alice is caught in the White Rabbit's house, she tries to grab hold of the Rabbit, "she suddenly spread out her hand, and made a snatch in the air. She did not get a hold of anything, but she heard a little shriek and a fall", she tries again, "and at last she spread out her hand again, and made another snatch in the air (pg 34). This time there were two little shrieks" and then Bill comes down the chimney, "Oh! So Bill's got to come down the <https://assignbuster.com/alice-villain-or-victim-a-study-of-alice-in-wonderland-and-its-1951-film-adaptation/>

chimney, has he?’ said Alice to herself. ‘ Why, they seem to put everything on Bill! [...] this fireplace is narrow to be sure; but I think I can kick a little.’[...] then saying to herself ‘ This is Bill’, she gave one sharp kick[...]” (pg 35). Alice is again demonstrating her primal viciousness to the animals of Wonderland, trying to manhandle them, and then making a point to kick one of the characters. She is met with this violence by more violence. The Rabbit insists to burn the house down, to which Alice replies, “ If you do I’ll set Dinah at you!” showing that once again Alice resorts to her pet cat’s ferocity as a tool of her own viciousness (pg 36). This scene gives a much different impression during the movie because while there is still violence, it comes from a completely unrelated third party, which is the Dodo. Neither the Rabbit nor Alice express any wish of physical harm to the opposing party, rather, they both wish to just get Alice out of the house. However the Dodo proposes that the only solution is to “ smoke the monster out” and begins to prepare burning the house down all while both Alice and the Rabbit oppose this idea vehemently.

So rather than Alice showing any tyrannical or violent tendencies in the movie, she is the victim of other’s vicious qualities. We experience a great deal of violence throughout the novel, but extremely so once we come across the Queen of Hearts. Through the popular phrase, “ Off with their head!” we know that this character is a particularly violent one, however for the purpose of this paper, we will be looking specifically at the description of the croquet game, which we know from Alice’s prior experience with croquet, there is already a violent air to this game. The main extremity of this game seems to be with the playing materials, as each player is assigned a

hedgehog and a flamingo, and the card soldiers using their own bodies to create the arches. “ The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it WOULD twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing”

This description of Alice’s interaction with her flamingo and hedgehog continues to show her disregard for other’s feelings. Forcing and contorting her flamingo’s body into such a way and then hitting a hedgehog with it seems aggressive enough, but then we are told that after being hit on the head, the hedgehog would turn and look at her with such an expression that “ she could not help bursting out laughing”. This sadistic act seems particularly cruel and in comparison to the Queen’s empty threats of beheading is much more efficient. We still see the croquet game in the movie, however, Alice is shown as once again the victim of a mediocre flamingo that is refusing to participate, thus putting them at risk of being beheaded, with no interaction between her and the hedgehog where she is laughing at it.

Alice goes through Wonderland encountering many things that contradict reality, but the different representations expressed of Alice change the relationship she has to Wonderland. By making Alice violent and petulant, Carrol balances the connection made between her and this dream world, making this world equally harmful. However, by Disney creating this passive, helpless Alice and keeping this chaotic world, we are given a much different

interpretation of Wonderland. The sentimentalism that is created for the end of the movie seems to mirror Oz's moral that "there's no place like home", when in reality the novel holds no moral.

Alice in Wonderland. Prod. Walt Disney. 1951. Carroll, Lewis. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ; And, Through the Looking-glass and What Alice Found There. New York: Penguin Classics, 2009. Print.