

Animals of wonderland

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



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WHEN JOHN TENNIEL was providing 42 illustrations for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland in 1864 he was in his mid-forties, an established illustrator and a Punch cartoonist.

At that time C. L. Dodgson and Lewis Carroll were equally unknown as authors, for adults or children. Tenniel, on the other hand, already had a professional understanding of the visual codes and illustrative techniques of his day, and already had an audience--an adult rather than a child audience--who would expect from him a certain level of technical proficiency, humor, and social nous.

Tenniel's illustrations should therefore interest us today not just for their remarkable and continuing success as a felicitous adjunct to Carroll's text, but also as the first--arguably, the best--Victorian reading or interpretation of Carroll's text. After all, as a reader Tenniel enjoyed considerable advantages, including his personal position and experience, his access to the author's own illustrations to the manuscript version of the story, and access to the author himself.

In his study of illustration in children's literature, *Words about Pictures*, Perry Nodelman has argued that "the pictures in a sequence act as schemata for each other"--that is, all the expectations, understanding, and information we bring to reading an illustrated book, and all the information we accumulate

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as our reading proceeds, " becomes a schema for each new page of words and each new picture as we continue throughout a book. (FN1) If this is so, all Tenniel's choices relating to subject matter, size, position, and style of illustration must come to operate, as we proceed through Alice in Wonderland, as a kind of guide to reading Carroll's text. An examination of Tenniel's opening sequence of illustrations as they appeared on the page in the 1866 edition of Alice in Wonderland(FN2) will therefore begin to reveal Tenniel's preoccupations, the kind of interpretation of Carroll's text he is interested in making. As William Empson pointed out in 1935, two aspects of Alice are traditional in children's stories: the idea of characters of unusual size (miniatures and giants) and the idea of the talking beast. (FN3) Tenniel's opening drawing, the White Rabbit at the head of chapter 1, draws on both these traditions. The rabbit occupies a point between animal and human, simultaneously both these things and neither of them, an implication hardly made so firmly by Carroll's text.

The rabbitness of the rabbit is emphasized by the meadow setting, the absence of trousers, and the careful attention paid to anatomy and proportion. But the rabbit is slightly distorted towards the human by his upright posture, his clothing and accessories, his pose, and his human eye and hand. Less obviously, Tenniel also extends Carroll's text by offering information about the size of the rabbit. From the grass and dandelion clock (a visual joke) in the background the reader grasps the rabbit as rather larger than normal bunny size: about the size of a toddler or small child, perhaps.

As this illustration was invented by Tenniel (Carroll's headpiece illustration shows Alice, her sister, and the book), the contrast is clear between Carroll, whose picture draws attention to the frame of the story, to the affectionate relationship of sisters, and thereby to Alice's membership of the human family, and Tenniel, who selects a traditional story idea that shifts the focus another way, toward a mediation between different kinds familiar from those many forms of art in which animal behavior is used to represent human behavior.

In further illustrations, Tenniel offers more images suggestive of unusual relative size. The second picture, page 8, shows Alice too large to go through the little door. On page 10 she holds the bottle labeled "DRINK ME" which will shrink her; on page 15 she is growing taller, with the text elongated to match. Then comes page 18, where the frame and larger size suggest that here is an important picture. In it the human/animal rabbit and the idea of Alice's unusual size occur together.

Alice looks gigantic in relation to the hallway, and the White Rabbit, normal size for the hallway (it appears) but perhaps (in that case) outsize for a rabbit, is much reduced from the importance he assumed in the first illustration and is shown fleeing from her terrifying figure. The pool of tears illustration on page 26 also relates to these themes. Here a fully clad human, Alice, is depicted much the same size as the unclothed mouse with which she swims.

Note, too, that in the text, Alice frightens the mouse away as she had previously frightened the rabbit, although this time it is by talking about her pet, her cat Dinah. The reader who ponders this opening sequence of <https://assignbuster.com/animals-of-wonderland/>

illustrations might reflect that Alice would also be frightened of Dinah if she met her while still mouse-sized. The schemata, then, direct the reader towards a cluster of ideas in which animal fears and anxieties about survival are connected with images of lesser or greater relative size. FN4) Tenniel appears to have arrived at this interpretation independently: while he does frequently follow Carroll's designs closely in the subject and overall approach to an illustration (Michael Hancher provides some useful opportunities to make comparisons),(FN5) of the pictures just discussed only the one of Alice growing taller at the head of chapter 2 very much resembles a parallel drawing in Carroll's manuscript.

Moreover, when Tenniel does follow Carroll in choice of subject he usually makes significant changes in treatment: Tenniel's Alice, for instance, having slipped into the pool of tears, is very much more alarmed than Carroll's Alice. (FN6) Edward Hodnett, who reviewed Tenniel's work for the Alice books picture by picture, makes rather slighting remarks about several of the designs in this opening sequence: those on pages 8 and 10 are "too matter-of-fact to be necessary," the "elongated Alice stands merely looking round-eyed," and the second vignette of Alice swimming with the mouse "makes the first superfluous. (FN7) Hodnett seems to me to have missed the point. These designs are in my view extremely consistent in seeking and developing a particular nexus of ideas. Despite the evident connection between many Tenniel illustrations and Carroll's own illustrations, then, this is clearly Tenniel's own interpretation. But if this is so, what is to be made of it?

My thesis in this paper is that through his animal drawings, Tenniel offers a visual angle on the text of *Alice in Wonderland* that evokes the life sciences, natural history, and Darwinian ideas about evolution, ideas closely related by Tenniel to Alice's size changes, and to how these affect the animals she meets. (FN8) As I will show, this is partly a matter of Tenniel's "drawing out" an underlying field of reference in Carroll's text. I will also argue, however, that when Tenniel's approach to his animal subjects is compared to that in earlier and contemporary illustrated natural history books, the viewer is conscious of resemblances which indicate that Tenniel's pictures are best situated and read in that context. The effect of the initial sequence described above, for instance, is that as chapter 3 unfolds Alice's encounters with various different creatures, the illustrations begin to re-create Alice itself as a kind of zany natural history for children. Our post-Freudian view of Alice in Wonderland tends to be of a private, heavily encoded, inward exploration or adventure.

But Tenniel's reading, I would argue, offers us an outward-looking text, a public adventure, a jocular reflection on the natural history craze, on reading about natural history, and on Darwin's controversial new theory of natural selection. I will return to Tenniel as reader later, but in order to establish that this interpretation is no mere add-on but a genuine response to the text, I must first deal with science, natural history, and evolutionary ideas as themes that Carroll himself originates.

Interest in contemporary ideas about the animal kingdom is signaled early on in *Alice in Wonderland*, in chapter 2, when Alice finds that the well-known children's recitation piece "How doth the little busy bee" has been

mysteriously ousted from her mind by new verses that celebrate a predator, the crocodile. Carroll's parody of Isaac Watts's pious poem for children(FN9) thereby establishes his book's reference to a newer, more scientific view of nature--approaching a controversially Darwinist view.

It does this by mocking and displacing the worldview often called natural theology. According to natural theology, a set of convictions much touted in children's reading, God's existence can be deduced from the wondrous design of his creation. The universe is benign and meaningful, a book of signs (like the industrious bee) of God's benevolent and educative intentions just waiting to be read by humans. Carroll's crocodile, all tooth and claw, signifies other things: amorality, the struggle for existence, predation of the weaker by the stronger.

Readers of Alice in Wonderland are also likely to notice that the animal characters do not behave or talk much like animals in traditional fairy tales or fables. They are neither helpers nor donors nor monsters nor prophetic truth-tellers, the main narrative functions of animals in traditional fairy tales, (FN10) but nor are they the exemplary figures illustrative of human fallibilities and moralities familiar from fables. They do not teach lessons about kindness to animals, as animals in children's stories often did, and they do not much resemble the creatures in nursery rhymes or jingles or Edward Lear's nonsensical poems either.

Instead, they talk, chopping logic, competing with Alice and each other, and often mentioning things "natural" animals might be imagined to talk about, like fear, death, and being eaten. I think Denis Crutch is also roughly right when he points out that there is in Alice a hierarchy of animals equivalent to <https://assignbuster.com/animals-of-wonderland/>

the Victorian class system but also suggesting a competitive model of nature: the white rabbit, caterpillar, and March Hare seem to be gentlemen, frog and fish are footmen, Bill the lizard is bullied by everybody, hedgehogs and flamingos are made use of, and the dormouse and the guinea pigs are victimized by larger animals and by humans. FN11) William Empson's 1935 essay notes how Carroll's ideas and manuscript illustrations associate evolutionary theories with Alice in Wonderland. (FN12) This is a crucial point and, I believe, the best explanation for the presence of so many animals in Wonderland. It was after all Carroll who put a dodo, best known for being extinct, into the text,(FN13) and Carroll who first included an ape, that key symbol of evolutionary debate, in his drawing of the motley crowd of beasts in the pool of tears.

But Carroll's evolutionary reference is much more extensive than Empson found it, for a Darwinist view of life as competitive struggle is also promoted by Alice, who--apparently unconsciously, as if she really cannot help it--repeatedly reminds us that in life one must either eat or be eaten. Alice will keep talking about Dinah to the little creatures she meets who are the natural victims of cats (26-27), she has to admit to the pigeon that she herself has eaten eggs (73), and in the Mock Turtle scene she has to check herself rather than reveal that she has eaten lobster and whiting (148, 152).

The Mock Turtle, of course, is a very creature of the table, while Dinah the predator, the aboveground cat, has a place maintained for her in Wonderland by the Cheshire Cat, a friendly but slightly sinister appearing and disappearing cat whose most significant body part is his grinning, tooth-filled mouth (he grins like the crocodile, as Nina Auerbach has noted). (FN14)

The " little bright-eyed terrier" of which the aboveground Alice is so fond (27) also has other-selves in Wonderland, Fury in the Mouse's Tale, the puppy in chapter 4.

Moreover, the Mouse's Tale--the next poem in the book after the crocodile poem--talks about predation as if it were a legal process. The reader should therefore take the hint and connect the animal " eat or be eaten" motif elsewhere in the story with the trial scene in the last stage of the book. Carroll has the White Rabbit make this association of ideas when he mutters " The Duchess! The Duchess! Oh my dear paws!

Oh my fur and whiskers! She'll get me executed, as sure as ferrets are ferrets! " (41). This is one of those moments when Alice reveals its ferocious undercurrent. The White Rabbit here anticipates legal execution as simultaneous with the process of being prepared for table: that is, these " civilized" human behaviors are proffered by Carroll as analogous to predation by a " natural" enemy, ferrets.

Alice herself, by kicking Bill the Lizard up the chimney (an incident memorably illustrated by Tenniel in a very funny picture) and by looking on approvingly while the guinea pigs are so unkindly treated in court, inverts the theme of kindness to animals established in more orthodox children's literature like Maria Edgeworth's tale of " Simple Susan," where a girl's pet lamb is saved from the slaughterer's knife. FN15) In Alice in Wonderland there is humorous delight in the misappropriation of the creatures in the croquet scene, and there are many other versions of a cruel carnival in the book: for instance, Alice imagines herself being set to watch a mousehole by her own cat. She also resents " being ordered about by mice and rabbits"

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(46)--a phrase that suggests the " world upside down" of carnival but which might also be taken as summing up the new evolutionary predicament of humanity.

Fallen down the rabbit hole from her lordly position at the top of the Great Chain of Being, Alice instead finds herself, through a series of size changes, continually being repositioned in the food chain. The importance of the theme of predation, " the motif of eating and being eaten," is such that it has attracted a number of commentaries. It is fully described by Margaret Boe Birns in " Solving the Mad Hatter's Riddle" and by Nina Auerbach in " Alice and Wonderland: A Curious Child. (FN16) Birns remarks in opening her essay that " Most of the creatures in Wonderland are relentless carnivores, and they eat creatures who, save for some outer physical differences, are very like themselves, united, in fact, by a common 'humanity. "' Birns therefore even cites a crocodile-eating fish as a case of " cannibalism,"(FN17) quoting in support of this idea Alice's " Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyaena and you're a bone! (Looking-Glass, 8). She also remarks that Wonderland contains creatures whose only degree of self-definition is expressing a desire to be eaten or drunk, and offers other comments on scenes in *Through the Looking-Glass* where, as she puts it, " food can become human, human beings can become food. "(FN18) I do not always find " cannibal" readings supported by the parts of the text in question.

Auerbach also makes claims about cannibalism, but a little differently, referring the idea of " eat or be eaten" back to Alice, her " subtly cannibalistic hunger,"(FN19) the " unconscious cannibalism involved in the very fact of eating and the desire to eat. "(FN20) Auerbach associates this

interpretation with Dodgson's own attitude to food. But textual support for the quality Auerbach calls Alice's cannibalism seems lacking. Alice does not really eye the other animals in her pool of tears with "a strange hunger" as Auerbach suggests,(FN21) nor do the Hatter and the Duchess "sing savage songs about eating" as Auerbach claims. FN22) To describe a panther eating an owl as cannibalism, Auerbach(FN23) must assume (like Birns) that the creatures in Alice are definitely to be read as humans in fur and feathers. My argument is that they need not be so read: the point might be their and Alice's animal nature. Nor does the food at Queen Alice's dinner party at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass* "begin to eat the guests"(FN24) as Auerbach claims, although food does misbehave in *Looking-Glass* and the Pudding might have this in mind (*Looking-Glass*, 206).

Overall, however, in my view the preoccupation of Alice in *Wonderland* with creatures eating other creatures is much better accounted for by the "more sinister and Darwinian aspects of nature"(FN25) which Auerbach and Birns(FN26) also recognize as a part of the Alice books. I now return to my main argument, that Tenniel's illustrations pick up on but also extend this Darwinist and natural history field of reference in Carroll's text.

As already noted, Tenniel's drawings of animals do not stylistically suggest a "children's fairy tale"(FN27) but rather produce Alice as a kind of natural history by resembling those in the plentiful and lavishly illustrated popular natural histories of the day (see figs. 1 and 2). My argument therefore differs from Michael Hancher's, which emphasizes social and satirical contexts by comparing pictures of various *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* creatures to those in Tenniel's and others' *Punch* cartoons. FN28) While Hancher

establishes the relationship with Punch as an important one, however, the most convincing animal resemblances he reproduces from Alice in Wonderland (I am not here concerned with Through the Looking-Glass) amount to only two pictures, the Cheshire Cat in a tree resembling the "Up a Tree" cartoon of a raccoon,(FN29) and the ape on page 35 of Alice resembling the ape in "Bomba's Big Brother,"(FN30) Tenniel's frog footman and fish footman are Grandvillian figures with animal heads but human bodies, and also evidently suggest social commentary.

But they stand apart from the argument I am presenting here because no effort is made by Tenniel to present them as animals. The satiric side of Tenniel's animal illustrations in Alice, hinted at by echoes of Punch, is never very dominant, then, and should not be seen as precluding another field of reference in natural history reading.

The scope, persistence, eccentricity, and variety of the natural history craze--or rather, series of crazes--that swept Britain between 1820 and 1870 are described for the general reader by Lynn Barber in *The Heyday of Natural History* and by others in more specialized publications, and need not be redescribed here. (FN31) The importance of illustration in contemporary natural history publishing, however, is central to my argument and must be touched on briefly.

Even in the midcentury climate of Victorian self-improvement and self-education, the volume of this well-established branch of publishing is impressive: the standard of illustration in popular periodicals and books was high, and sales were also impressively high in Victorian terms. Rev. John George Wood, according to his son and biographer Theodore Wood, a <https://assignbuster.com/animals-of-wonderland/>

pioneer in writing natural history in nontechnical language, had reasonable sales for his one-volume *The Illustrated Natural History* in 1851 and very good sales for *Common Objects of the Sea Shore* in 1857.

But when Routledge brought out his lavishly illustrated *Common Objects of the Country* in 1858 it sold 100, 000 copies within a week of publication, and the first edition was followed by many others, a figure worth comparing with Darwin's more modest first-edition sell-out of 1, 250 copies--or, indeed, with Dickens's sales of *Bleak House* (1852), which were 35, 000 in the first two years.

The result of Wood's success was a much grander publishing venture by Routledge, Wain and Routledge, a three-volume *The Illustrated Natural History* with new drawings including some by Joseph Wolf: volume 1 (1859) was on mammals, volume 2 (1862) on birds--the frontispiece is reproduced in figure 2--and volume 3 (1863) on reptiles, fish, and mollusks. FN32) Wood's astonishingly prolific career as a popularizer, however, of which I have described only a tiny fraction (he was dashing off such productions as *Anecdotes of Animal Life*, *Every Boy's Book*, and *Feathered Friends* in this decade as well), is in line with much other more or less theologically inclined and intellectually respectable natural history publishing in the 1850s and 1860s, often by clergymen.

Children were important consumers of such books and periodicals and sometimes are obviously their main market, and a number of fictional works, such as Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) and Margaret Gatty's *Parables from Nature*, of which the first four series appeared between 1855 and 1864 (that is, in the decade prior to Carroll's publication of *Alice in* <https://assignbuster.com/animals-of-wonderland/>

Wonderland), capitalize on the contemporary conviction that natural history was a subject especially appropriate for children. (FN33) Tenniel connects his Alice and natural history illustration by a number of stylistic allusions.

He borrows the conventional techniques of realism, such as the cross-hatching and fine lines used to suggest light, shade, and solidity of form in the Mock Turtle's shell and flippers, or the crabs' and lobster's claws. Accuracy in proportion and a high level of anatomical detail are equally important. As can be seen by comparing figures 1 and 2, too, the grouping of subjects may also be suggestive--a point first noted by Narda Schwartz, who also drew attention to the resemblance between the etching of the dodo in Wood's three-volume natural history and Tenniel's dodo. FN34) Also significant is the way Tenniel's design showing the creatures recently emerged from the pool of tears includes a rather furry-haired Alice among, and on a level with, the beasts and birds. Carroll's own pictures for the pool of tears sequence have the quite different effect of separating Alice from the animal world, a point I will return to. Another Tenniel habit that suggests natural history illustration is his provision of sketchy but realistic and appropriate backgrounds.

Here Tenniel's viewpoint sometimes miniaturizes the reader, setting the viewpoint low and thus letting us in on the ground level of a woodland world magnified for our information (compare figs. 3 and 4). When Alice stands on tiptoe to peep over the edge of a mushroom, when she carries the pig baby in the woods or talks to the Cheshire Cat, Tenniel uses a typical natural history technique, placing a familiar woodland flower--a foxglove--in the background in such a way as to remind the reader of Alice's size at that time.

Similarly, Tenniel makes use of the difference between vignettes for simple or single subjects, and framed illustrations, including full-page illustrations, for larger-scale and more important and complex subjects, in a way that very closely resembles a similar distinction in natural history illustration--popular natural histories like Wood's tend to use large, framed illustrations to make generalized statements, showing, for instance, a group of different kinds of rodent, while vignettes present an individual of one species.

And above all, although Tenniel certainly endows his creatures with personality and facial expressions, his animals, unlike his humans, are never grotesques. In fact, nineteenth-century natural history illustration also delights in endowing the most solidly "realistic" creatures with near-human personality or expressiveness, a quality that Tenniel builds on to good effect, for instance, in his depiction of the lawyer-parrots, which remind one of Edward Lear's magnificent macaws (see figs. 5, 6, and 7).

Thus while Tenniel's animal portraits reflect the Victorians' pleasure in their expanding knowledge of the variety of creatures in the world, they also faithfully reproduce the contemporary assimilation of this variety to familiar human social types, a sleight of hand of which Audubon, for example, is a master: his Great Blue Heron manages also to subtly suggest a sly old gentleman, probably shortsighted, and with side-whiskers. In the visual world inhabited by Tenniel, then, the differing works of Audubon and Grandville (the latter could depict a heron as a priest merely by giving the bird spectacles) slide together.

Where few of Tenniel's successors have been able to resist the temptation to turn the animals in Alice in Wonderland into cartoon or humorous creations,

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though, it is Tenniel's triumph that he drew his creatures straight, or almost straight: the Times review of *Alice in Wonderland* (December 26, 1865) particularly noted for praise Tenniel's "truthfulness ... in the delineation of animal forms." (FN35) It was, indeed, his skill in drawing animals that first established his reputation as an illustrator, when he provided illustrations for Rev. Thomas James's *Aesop's Fables* in 1848. (FN36) Can sources for Tenniel's remarkable animal drawings be more precisely identified? An early biographer of Tenniel records his acknowledgment that he liked to spend time observing the animals at the Zoo. (FN37) However, comparisons between pictures reveal that in addition Tenniel almost certainly consulted scientific illustrations or recalled them for his *Alice in Wonderland* drawings. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century George Edwards produced a hand-colored engraving of a dodo which, he wrote, he had copied from a painting of a live dodo brought from Mauritius to Holland.

The original painting was acquired by Sir Hans Sloane, passed on to Edwards, and given by him to the British Museum. (FN38) In 1847 C. A. Marlborough painted a picture of a dodo, which is now in the Ashmolean Museum (it was reproduced on the cover of the magazine *Oxford Today* in 1999). And in 1862 the second volume of J. G. Wood's *The Illustrated Natural History* includes a picture of a dodo. (FN39) Compare all these with Tenniel's dodo (figs. 8, 9, 10, and 11): they surely either have a common ancestor or are copies one from the other. The dodo is a special case in that Tenniel could hardly have studied one at the London zoo.

But I wish to put forward a claim that Wood's 1851 one-volume and, later, expanded three-volume *Illustrated Natural History* were very probably

familiar to Carroll and the small Liddells and also to Tenniel, not only because Wood's dodo illustration is a possible source for Tenniel's but because these volumes also display smiling crocodiles, baby eagles in their nest, and the lory,(FN40) as well as illustrations of numerous more familiar animals that appear in the words and/or pictures of Alice, including the edible crab, the lobster, the frog, the dormouse, guinea pigs, flamingos, varieties of fancy pigeon, and so forth.

Given the compendious nature of Wood's works, this is hardly surprising, of course. But Wood must be favored as the source of animal drawings most probably known to Tenniel for the further reason that Wood illustrations often quite strongly resemble Tenniel illustrations, as readers may judge by comparing figures 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16, to the toucan, eagle, and crab from Alice (see fig. 1) and the lobster and dormouse (see Alice in Wonderland, 157 and 97). (FN41) No matter how good Tenniel's famous visual memory, he is unlikely to have drawn such a menagerie without some research.

Hancher noted the strong resemblance between a Bewick hedgehog (from the General History of Quadrupeds, 1790, often reprinted) and the evasive croquet-ball hedgehog at Alice's feet on page 121. (FN42) Bewick's hedgehog, however, had already been recycled by William Harvey for Wood's one-volume Illustrated Natural History where Tenniel is equally likely to have seen and remembered it: all three hedgehogs have the same dragging rear foot (see figs. 17, 18, and 19). This is another case, like that of the dodo, where scientific natural history illustrations have been copied, recopied, or reworked for reprinting.

A similar argument could be presented about the large number of depictions of sinuous flamingos that Tenniel might have consulted. The volume of contemporary natural history publishing for children and adults, the evident contemporary interest in illustrations of animals, and the resemblance between Tenniel's and contemporary natural history drawings have important implications: the resemblance indicates that Tenniel is here creating the context within which he wants his pictures to be read.

He shows us that he saw (and wanted the viewer to be able to see) Carroll's animals as "real" animals, like those that were the objects of current scientific study and theories, at least as much as he saw them as Grandville or Punch-type instruments of social satire, or fairy-tale or fable talking beasts. (FN43) In line with his scientific interpretation, then, Tenniel in illustrating Alice in Wonderland intensifies Carroll's reference to Darwin's theory of evolution by carrying out his own visual editing of the Carroll illustrations in the manuscript.

Tenniel makes the ape appear in two consecutive illustrations: in the second, it stares thoughtfully into the eyes of the reader--appearing to claim kinship. Tenniel includes among the creatures in these illustrations on pages 29 and 35 a fancy pigeon, perhaps a fantail or a pouter, which should in my view be taken as a direct reference to Darwin's argument from the selective breeding of fancy pigeon varieties in chapter 1 of *The Origin of Species*. (FN44) A visual detail that Tenniel introduced into the book, the glass dome in the background to the royal garden scene on page 117, looks like the dome at the old Surrey Zoological Gardens (FN45) and therefore constitutes another reference to the study of animals. And as already noted, Tenniel does not

reproduce Carroll's rather lonely image of Alice abandoned by the animals, which would have had the effect of separating her human figure from the animal ones and thus emphasizing Alice's difference from them.

Instead, Tenniel provides two images of Alice among, and almost of, the animal world, developing a radical implication of Carroll's text of which Carroll himself was possibly unaware. On the other hand, Carroll's interest in predation, in the motif of "eat or be eaten," is not one on which Tenniel expands. No doubt it would have been thought too frightening for children: one must recall the care taken by Carroll over the positioning of the Jabberwocky illustration in *Through the Looking-Glass*. FN46) But while Carroll's text here develops emphatically--albeit peripherally--some ideas that Tenniel could only leave aside, Tenniel's recognition of the importance of such themes is strongly demonstrated by the puppy picture. This illustration is a particularly large one, dominating the page (55) on which it appears. It is framed, and therefore gives an impression of completion and independent significance, very different from that given by the more common vignette with its intimate and fluid relationship to the text.

These things make it probable that the puppy scene and its illustration were especially important in Tenniel's reading of *Alice in Wonderland*. Yet commentaries on *Alice in Wonderland* tend to ignore the puppy scene, perhaps because critics are often most interested by Carroll's verbal nonsense, and the puppy is speechless. Indeed, Denis Crutch disapproves of the puppy as "an intruder from the 'real' world" and Goldthwaite takes up this point, commenting that the puppy was Carroll's "most glaring aesthetic mistake in ...

Alice"--neither seems to have noticed that the hedgehogs and flamingos are also not talking beasts. (FN47) Another reader of Tenniel's illustrations, Isabelle Nieres, takes a similar line, remarking that " the full-page illustration is perhaps placing too much emphasis on Alice's encounter with the puppy. "(FN48) But what Tenniel's puppy illustration encapsulates, in my view, is the theme of the importance of relative size. Here is Alice's fearful moment of uncertainty about whether she is meeting a predator or a pet. As reader and Alice will discover, the puppy only wants to play.

But Alice is " terribly frightened all the time at the thought it might be hungry, in which case it would be very likely to eat her up in spite of all her coaxing" (54), and Tenniel's illustration with the thistle in the foreground towering over the tiny Alice, like many of his memorable illustrations, primarily signifies her anxiety. Later, too, Tenniel's choice of the lobster as the subject of a drawing is a visual reminder of the transformation of animals into meat: it brings the viewer uncomfortably close to recognition of kinship with the devoured, so human is the lobster and so warily is his eye fixed on the viewer's.

The lobster is another illustration that Hodnett found an inexplicable presence in the text: the song in the text " provides insufficient excuse for an illustration," he remarks. (FN49) My analysis of Tenniel's composite verbal/visual Alice in Wonderland is very different. Possibly going well beyond Carroll's conscious intentions, Tenniel offers a Wonderland that concurs with the evolutionist view of creation by showing animals and humans as a continuum within which the stronger or larger prey upon the smaller or weaker.

The implication--one many readers of Darwin were most reluctant to accept--is that if animals are semihuman, humans may conversely be nothing but evolved animals. Alice's extraordinary size changes--in which Tenniel is so interested--therefore play a significant role in this new world, for as I already pointed out, it is through her series of size changes that Alice finds herself continually being repositioned in the food chain.

Wonderland is truly the place of reversals: its theme of a world upside down is traditional, as Ronald Reichertz has reminded us in an illuminating study that positions Alice in Wonderland in relation to earlier children's reading. (FN50) Size changes can represent the topsy-turvy, of course. But while Alice has some recognizably Jack-in-Giant-land experiences--like struggling to climb up the leg of a table--and some Tom Thumb experiences--like hiding behind a thistle--what is so weird or Wonderlandish about her story is not her sudden growth spurts but that she transforms rapidly from the small to the large and vice versa. FN51) Alice's body changes at times suggest being outsize and aggressive--for example, when she is trapped in the White Rabbit's house and terrifies the little creatures outside, or when she is accused of being an egg-stealing serpent or predator by the pigeon. But she is undersized and therefore vulnerable when she slips into the pool of tears or when she meets the puppy. (FN52) The size changes connect back to "eat or be eaten" where the dangers of large and small size, a theme especially horrifying to children, is a traditional one, found in tales of giants and ogres, Hop-o' my Thumb or Mally Whuppie. FN53) But as we have seen, the Tenniel/Carroll Alice in Wonderland links forward to ideas of predator and prey, eat or be eaten, and the "animal" nature of humanity, all recently

given new urgency by Darwin. A contemporary illustration worth pondering that deals with these important ideas (it appeared at almost exactly the time of the publication of *Alice in Wonderland*) is the cover of *Hardwicke's Science-Gossip: A Monthly Medium of Interchange & Gossip for Students and Lovers of Nature* (January 1866).

This cover represents (see fig. 20) the scientific technology that interested Carroll, as well as, more sentimentally, the small creatures and plants of woodland and seashore that are a part of the "natural history" background. These subjects, however, make a mere frame to the central illustration, both grisly and amusing, which is a depiction of the chain of predation, eat or be eaten, in action. One could hardly ask for a more succinct visual summary of this important element in the contemporary contexts of *Alice*.

Recognition of this theme will, as well as accounting for lobster and puppy illustrations, also account for the otherwise somewhat puzzling centrality of Dinah and the Cheshire Cat in Carroll's text. Nina Auerbach quotes Florence Becker Lennon's insight that the Cheshire Cat is "Dinah's dream-self," and certainly one or the other is more or less ever-where in *Wonderland*. (FN54) I think the reason for this must be that this familiar household pet best emphasizes the paradoxical difference between being large, in which state the cat is a delightful little furry companion, and being small, in which state the cat might kill you and eat you.

In the Darwinian world, size can be the key to survival. And yet, Carroll selected a smiling crocodile to stand for the new view of creation. The cruelty of the Darwinian world is, in his view, somehow inseparable from delight. To suggest a context for this unexpected but quintessentially

nineteenth-century state of mind,(FN55) a comparison may be made here between Carroll's poetic vision of his particular predator and Henry de la Beche's 1830 cartoon of life in A More Ancient Dorset; or, Durior Antiquior (see fig. 1). De la Beche was English despite his name, and was the first director of the British Geological Survey. According to Stephen Jay Gould, who includes it in his preface to *The Book of Life*, de la Beche's spirited cartoon, simultaneously grim and humorous, was "reproduced endlessly (in both legitimate and pirated editions)" and is an important model, becoming "the canonical figure of ancient life at the inception of this genre."(FN56) In short, this is the first dinosaur picture.

Victorian paintings of nature (showing a similar pleasure to Carroll's in his crocodile) do tend to center on hunting and predation--see *The Stag at Bay*--and de la Beche's influential image, Gould explains, became a thoroughly conventional depiction of prehistory, first, in showing a pond unnaturally crowded with wildlife (rather like Carroll's pool of tears), and second, in depicting virtually every creature in it as "either a feaster or a meal"(FN57)--something one may also feel about Carroll's characters.

Particularly striking is the gusto, the pleurably half-horrified enjoyment of bloody prehistory, in de la Beche's cartoon, which in my view is very comparable to the enjoyment of the image of the devouring crocodile in Lewis's brilliant little parody. A slightly unpleasant gusto also animates Alice in *Wonderland*, a book that fairly crackles with energy although the energy has always been rather hard to account for.

While on the official levels of his consciousness Carroll "stood apart from the theological storms of the time,"(FN58) is it possible that the news of <https://assignbuster.com/animals-of-wonderland/>

evolution through natural selection was, on another level of his mind, good news to him as to many other Victorians, coming as a kind of mental liberation? Humanity might well have found crushing, at times, the requirements of moral responsibility and constant self-improvement imposed by mid-Victorian ideals of Christian duty.

Alice, for one, young as she is, has already thoroughly internalized many rules of conduct, and Alice's creator, equipped as he was with what Donald Rackin has called a "rage for standards and order," (FN59) revels in the upsetting of order (as well as disowning this upsetting thoroughly when Alice awakens from her dream). The exhilaration of an amoral anti-society in Alice in Wonderland may be, therefore, in part the exhilaration of a Darwinist dream, of selfishness without restraint.

As we all know, Alice's route out of Wonderland is to grow out of it. In closing this essay a final suggestion may be made about Carroll and his self-depiction in Wonderland. If the book is full of expressions of anxiety about relative size--and the dangers of largeness and smallness--this may not merely be because a new theory of evolution by natural selection had enlivened this ancient theme. Possibly Carroll had adapted this theory as a private way of symbolizing for himself the anxieties and dangers of his relationship with

Alice and the other Liddell children. In Morton N. Cohen's biography Lewis Carroll, a table numbers the occurrences of guilty self-reproach and resolves to amend in Carroll's diaries and shows how these peaked at the time of his deepest involvement with the Liddell family. (FN60) Is it possible that Carroll, far from suffering a repressed interest in little girls, consciously

acknowledged and wrestled in private prayer with his own impossible desires?

It seems to become ever more difficult, rather than easier, to read this aspect of Carroll's life. In a recent Times Literary Supplement (February 8, 2002), Karoline Leach argues that Carroll's friendships with children were emphasized in his nephew Stuart Collingwood's biography to distract attention from the potentially more scandalous fact of the older Carroll's friendships with mature women.

A letter in response by Jenny Woolf, on February 15, points out that Carroll's sisters continued to recognize Carroll's women friends, so obviously perceived these friendships as chaste, but reminds us of the possibility that Dodgson may have cultivated girl children as friends because of their innocence, because they were sexually "safe" to him, rather than because they were dangerously enticing.

A response to this position, of course, would be that the assiduity with which Carroll cultivated friendships with small girls seems out of proportion to such a purpose. Whatever the truth of these matters, it appears to me that Carroll, distressed by the emotional battles documented in his diary, might well have developed a set of imaginative scenarios in which a little girl's growing up or down is reversible according to her own desire: this offers one kind of explanation of some of the more mysterious events of Wonderland.

The dangerous but exhilarating aspects of Carroll's relationship with his little friends seems to fit neatly into a "tooth and claw" model of society, too, for each party to such a friendship, although acting in innocence and affection,

has a kind of reserve capacity to destroy, to switch from pet to predator. Carroll might even have dramatized himself as a beast in a Darwinian world in relation to these little girls who are never the right size for him.

At times he is only the pet--a romping, anxious-to-please, but oversized puppy. But there are other times when he might fear becoming the predator, a crocodile whose welcoming smile masks the potential to devour. And conversely, of course, Carroll's beloved little friends had the monstrous capacity to destroy him, morally and socially, if he should ever overstep the boundaries of decency and trust.

Tenniel, presumably unaware of any secret underside to Carroll's life, was anyway debarred by Victorian regard for children as viewers from depicting the savage underside of Alice. But by referring the reader outward to current controversies and current interests in the natural sciences, he has succeeded wonderfully in rendering in art both Carroll's, and his own, grasp of the importance of a new worldview, and of the explosive anxiety and exhilaration to which it gave birth. ADDED MATERIAL ROSE LOVELL-SMITH