

Argumentative essay on absurdity in wonderland

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One of the predominant elements in literature written since 1940, particularly in the Europe and the United States, is the absurd. The world events of the first half of the century - not one but two worldwide conflicts, one of which featured the use of biological weapons, and the other of which ended with nuclear holocaust; a global economic depression; a worldwide influenza epidemic; and the takeover of much of eastern Europe by the Soviet machine, mirrored by the corporate appropriation of the West, made all of life seem ridiculous and pointless. The plays of Samuel Beckett, the novels of George Orwell and Ray Bradbury, the poetry of Sylvia Plath, and the surrealism that found its way into the visual arts all express this idea. However, the notion that life is meaningless is not a new one (Holquist). King Solomon, widely credited with having written the book of Ecclesiastes, also wrote that everything is vanity - without significance. Lewis Carroll, writing in an England in which little made sense politically, with the country still stifling under monarchy, incorporates the fact that life is absurd as one of the major themes in his novel *Alice in Wonderland*.

Elements of the absurd enter the story almost from the very beginning. Alice falls down a hole that, at first glance, should be too small to admit her but widens and turns out to be very deep. However, the laws of gravity have apparently paused, because she merely floats to the bottom. She finds a vial with a liquid to make her shrink; and a cake that will make her grow. There is no explanation for these items - only the idea that she needs to consume them. These items represent the absurdity that often begins in adolescence, as the process of constructing identity at the end of childhood often involves

trying a number of strategies to define oneself (and often these strategies include consuming strange substances) (Empson).

Other puzzles in the book make Alice's journey appear even more absurd. The Caucus race, for example, is impossible to understand (Levin); of course, if one tries to understand the rules of caucuses in some of the different states during an American Presidential election, one can end up just as confused as Alice; for example, in the state of Texas, it is possible to vote for two different candidates if you are a Democrat. There is one poll taken in the morning; if you vote in the morning, you can attend a caucus meeting in the evening, at which point you can vote again - but you can vote for a different Democrat. Perhaps the most famous example of an unsolvable riddle that Alice encounters is the Mad Hatter's question: "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" The fact that this question is not answerable does not bother the Hatter's party at all; it only bothers Alice, who still believes that the questions of life have rational, accessible answers (Holmes). The croquet game that the queen is running is similarly indecipherable, although what is almost just as confusing is the fact that the players persist, having a wonderful time while pursuing inscrutable ends (Flescher). There are two lessons here for Alice: first, that the puzzles in life do not have meaningful answers; second, that pursuing those answers in the face of their nonexistence is a sure prescription for a descent into insanity.

Carroll uses several of the events of Alice in Wonderland to demonstrate the general absurdity of life as a whole. While it would be extreme to suggest that Carroll implies that there are no true sources of meaning in life, it is not

extreme to infer that Carroll believes life to be a source of frustration when it comes to setting and meeting expectations. Even those problems in life that seem to have obvious answers, the hard truth is that those answers may not exist – and if they exist in one particular situation, they may well vanish when a second person happens upon that situation. This lack of universality serves as a precursor for the structuralist ideas of the twentieth century. This school of thought held forth that meaning is not permanent; instead, the meaning of a particular text, or of a particular event, varied from reader to reader (or from participant to participant). The reason for this is that each viewer or participant brings his or her own set of unique experiences to life – and that those experiences color interpretation (Barthes). While this removes much of the certainty from life, it also adds hope – because it means that even though a particular solution did not work for someone else, it might work for you. Alice can't figure out the rules to the croquet game, but she has the choice whether or not to let herself go and simply enjoy the play.

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