

Delving deeper into the rabbit hole: death in a children's book



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Lewis Carroll's classic story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, tells the enchanting tale of a young Alice and the exciting journey she embarks on after falling down the rabbit hole. While on the surface it may appear as a pleasant children's book filled with vibrant and humorous characters, if one delves below the surface Wonderland holds much more than the reader may think at a first glance. Through the reoccurring theme of death in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll draws a stark contrast between the various characters' view of death, suggesting that some people choose to avoid the topic entirely, while children such as Alice are often inherently curious about it, and are often unable to recognize potentially fatal dangers. Through the inclusion of this concept, Carroll emphasizes the inquisitive and innately curious nature of children, but also implies that adults and the animals in this story often have different methods of avoidance to escape from delving deeply into unpleasant topics such as this, as to avoid thinking about something so dark.

Almost as soon as Alice falls down the rabbit hole, the theme of death becomes apparent. There are subtle references throughout her slow tumble down the rabbit hole on her way to Wonderland, with Alice grabbing a jar of marmalade off of the wall, then deciding " she did not like to drop the jar, for fear of killing someone underneath" (Carroll, 10). Although Alice is a young girl, she is conscious of the concept of death, yet she looks upon it in a seemingly nonchalantly way. On such a long fall, she never once appears concerned for her safety, and does not even entertain the idea that she may be in a dangerous situation. Her nonchalant view of death and apparent unawareness of potential danger can be seen again when she exclaims, "

After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" (Carroll, 10). At a first glance, this may appear as a simple statement made by a child. However, Carroll is implying that if she were to truly fall off of her house, of course she would be unable to say anything about it because she would be dead. By including subtle and often morbid allusions to death from Alice throughout the story, Carroll emphasizes that children, while aware of death, are often unable to recognize or grasp some of the potential fatal dangers around them. Alice is no exception to this, and represents a typical child with the innocent remarks that they say that actually can portray something deeper.

While the character of Alice serves as a symbol of a child's naïve and innocent nature, she also is representative of children and their relationship with rules and their sense of safety. Quite often, children are raised to believe that following rules will keep them safe and away from all harm. This is especially true for Alice, and when looking at the table at the bottom of the rabbit hole, " she found a little bottle on it, and tied round the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words " DRINK ME"... No, I'll look first, she said, and see whether its marked ' poison' or not" (Carroll, 13). The mention of poison is a reinforcement of the theme of death present throughout the novel, with this scene again emphasizing the naïve nature of Alice and as an extension, children. While she does have the knowledge to check whether or not the bottle was labeled as something dangerous and even deadly, she still goes through with drinking it anyway, as Alice believes that it must be okay if it is not marked explicitly as poison. This raises the idea of rule following to

keep a child safe and how they view rules as something that will always be a protection barrier, although adults know this is not always the case. Alice goes on to speak about things she has learned, and mentions how “ she had read several nice little 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” (Carroll, 12).

Carroll implies that simply following the rules and doing as one is told is not nearly enough to keep an individual safe and away from death; by including this scene Carroll is simultaneously able to highlight the naïve nature of children, while at the same time maintain the theme of death. Due to Alice being a child, she has a unique outlook on death, along with a unique way of handling the concept. This particular view of hers is drastically different from others, as she is soon to learn as she spends more time in Wonderland.

One of the first characters Alice encounters in Wonderland is a Mouse while swimming around in the pool of her own tears. She attempts to strike up a conversation with the Mouse, and tries to catch his attention by speaking a phrase in French that happens to mention the word ‘ cat,’ and greatly startles the mouse. Alice does not quite understand this cue, and goes on to say, “ I wish I could show you our cat Dinah. I think you’d take a fancy to cats, if only you could see her...she is such a nice soft thing to nurse - and she’s such a capital one for catching mice” (Carroll, 21). She is seemingly unaware of this allusion of death that she is making in regards to the mouse. She is aware that mice dislike cats, yet says she wishes Dinah was there to catch the mouse so he may finish his story. This comment greatly reinforces the sense of innocence that Alice and many other children possess in terms

of death, and the almost casual lens that they view it through. While Alice may have no issue pondering the subject of death and may not have an imminent fear about it, not all of the characters she encounters feel the same way. The mouse for example exclaims, "As if I would talk on such a subject! Our family has always hated cats: nasty, low, vulgar things! Don't let me hear the name again!" (Carroll, 22). Contrasting with Alice, the mouse would much rather avoid the subject and spend no time at all pondering the idea. The idea of death is a very real fear for him, and many other characters as well. He requests to never hear the name of a cat again, suggesting death is a much more sensitive and real concept to him as compared to Alice.

While Alice may not see death as something so serious, the Mouse knows that it is a very real possibility for him to face death at the paws of a cat, and would prefer to simply ignore and avoid the subject. Offended by Alice, "the Mouse was swimming away from her as hard as it could go, and making quite a commotion in the pool as it went" (Carroll, 22). Not only does the Mouse verbally express his dislike for the conversation and tells Alice to cease speaking about it, but he physically removes himself from the situation, as that is his way of avoiding facing the concept of death. Not every character has the same mentality as Alice in this regard; something she continuously learns as she meets more and more creatures. A bit further on into her travels through Wonderland, Alice comes across the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon. Alice, being as curious as she is, asks to hear the Turtles story. She then goes on to question what a Mock Turtle actually is, and learns that, "It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from" (Carroll, 81). The Mock Turtle is not truly a turtle, but is depicted as part cow, and is intended for food nonetheless, which is where his permanent state of sadness comes

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from. The character of the Mock Turtle implies yet another death reference, and on the surface it may appear innocent, yet the song the Mock Turtle sings to Alice is about making a delicious turtle soup. These subtle allusions to death that Carroll makes are present throughout the entire story, and this interaction is no exception. As the meeting progresses, the Gryphon requests that Alice recite a poem, with a rather morbid ending. The Mock Turtle is extremely distressed by this, cutting Alice off by crying out, "What is the use of repeating all that stuff? The Mock Turtle interrupted" (Carroll, 93). This outburst from the Mock Turtle comes just after Alice was about to recite the ending of the poem about the panther and the owl. This ending distresses the Mock Turtle, as the owl ends up as food and is eaten, just as the Mock Turtle is intended as to be. Carroll includes this slightly morbid poem to highlight how the different characters handle death. Where as the Mouse physically swam away from Alice and her, the Mock Turtle directly interrupted her and cut her off before she was able to speak on the topic. This scene again emphasizes the fear of death the Wonderland's inhabitants possess, while at the same time continuing to display the stark contrast between their feelings on the matter and Alice's.

Yet another character with a strong, slightly indirect relationship to death is the Queen of Hearts. A character that inspires fear in others, the concept of death is not a very real one for her. As the most powerful force in Wonderland, she does not have the same relationship with death as the other characters do. She is not directly threatened by it, yet frequently threatens others with death, suggesting a sense of control and knowledge of how to use that fear of death to her advantage. At the slightest

inconvenience, “ The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, began screaming, ‘ Off with her head!’” (Carroll, 72). Carroll includes the Queen as a character to emphasize the range of different feelings about death within the Wonderland. It is noted that, “ The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. ‘ Off with his head!’ she said without even looking around” (Carroll, 75). Once again, the Queen herself is not threatened by death as she has the control, but threatens others with it as a means of control. She never actually has anyone executed, but as seen with previous characters such as the Mouse and the Mock Turtle, the creatures in Wonderland seem frightened of the thought of death. The Queen knows this, and plays on their fear to gain a sense of control, thinking of death in a drastically different way than both Alice and the creatures due to her high position.

Although the concept of death in a story about a young child may appear to be a strange one, Carroll includes allusions to death throughout Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland to place an emphasis on the variety of views on the topic within Wonderland. By examining the different views, one can see the many differences between a child’s view of death due to their naïve nature, and that of a more experience and mature adult. At a first glance, one may not notice these subtle mentions and references, but after a closer examination one can discover the additional layer of depth and complexity they add to an already exceptionally curious Wonderland.