

Alice coming into her own: the importance of societal rules in her identity and t...



Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* purposefully highlights the confusion of identity, including the distinction between adults and children, and poses important questions about childhood and growth. As the child reader explores this novel, they also explore the depths of their identity and as the adult reader explores, they rediscover a nostalgia for childhood.

Through mid-19th century-normative social mannerisms, Carroll shows two Alices: the Alice that is being preened for coming up in society and the Alice that is a fully formed person outside the demands of the external world.

Carroll's maneuvers between England and Wonderland are subtle, cheeky, and poignant, causing the reader to question what it means to be a child in a society where they are groomed to be proper. In Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice's identity, as well as that of the reader, is questioned and challenged in various nonsensical and reasonable social settings.

Mid-nineteenth century England fills the mind with many pictures of a world post-Industrial Revolution and full of tumultuous changes for society. In the midst of these changes, people still held close to the formalities of social behavior, impeding them on the next generation with the expectation that they grow up to be proper ladies and gentlemen. Didactic education was still very much a popular method, encouraging rote memorization of facts, formulas, and poetry; in *Alice's Adventures*, Alice struggles with this kind of memorization because of a lack of context. Her rhythm and syntax may match what she is taught, but, because context and meaning are not necessarily important for her to learn, she fails to understand. Especially when she is placed out of the context of school in England, Alice's knowledge is pointless. After incorrectly reciting "How doth the little busy bee," she

proclaims, “ I’m sure those are not the right words” (38). However, the rules in her society state that she must continue with her lessons no matter how much she may misunderstand. Failure to follow rules in Alice’s society can be thought to be madness; when Alice is warned by the Cheshire Cat that the March Hare is mad, she is anxious and worried about her visit. “ Suppose it should be raving mad after all!” she says, “ I almost wish I’d gone to see the Hatter instead!” (91). This fear of strangeness is promoted by adults and consumed by children in modern society, too; children worry about monsters under their beds and adults warn them not to talk to strangers. The idea of breaking the rules of social normativity is terrifying for Alice because of the possibly strict grooming of her childhood; the properness and politeness with which she is expected to align herself take over most of her personality in England. In forms of childhood when autonomy is not fully given, rules become a definite factor of moral identity. In Wonderland, the same rules do not apply.

Alice makes many attempts to remember her own societal rules, and in this way her faux moral identity, in Wonderland. From the moment she falls down the rabbit-hole she begins to think about her lessons, discussing geography and math, which Carroll plays up due to his mathematical background (27-28). In childhood, when school is the most significant event, it is understandable that she obsesses over these details, especially considering the rigid kind of schooling to which she may have been subject. Alice even attempts a curtsy while falling, which Carroll uses to emphasize the ridiculousness of this act: “ fancy, curtseying as you’re falling through the air!” (28). As Alice falls, her behavior does as well. She is unable to

remember many of her lessons and begins to even question her identity. “ I must have been changed for Mabel!” she exclaims when she considers her sudden confusion with her lessons (38). Without her knowledge of earthly things, it seems, she loses what she thinks is a large piece of her identity and, with it, some superiority she may have felt over other characters, like her classmate, Mabel. Alice begins to cry after this realization and, it seems, every instance in which she becomes conscious of the strangeness of Wonderland, displaying her highly volatile nature and need for stability, like any child, which her English society provides but Wonderland does not.

Although change is a constant phenomenon in Wonderland, it is seen as shocking and disruptive to the norms to which Alice is accustomed throughout the novel. For example, when Alice grows and shrinks rapidly, she creates a pool of tears from her nine-foot self (36). Later, however, she looks for a way to alter her size and treats it as an everyday occurrence (73). This normalizes the experience of change, creating the impression that the only time to be afraid is the first. This is a teaching moment for child readers. For children, the amazement, horror, and wonder at growth and change is new and understandable; as Alice realizes these new experiences, child readers may also find that things become “ curiouser and curiouser” (35), in interest, strangeness, and relatedness. While children are continuously growing and learning, they are still as human as adults are, and their growth often happens subconsciously. When Alice picks up the Rabbit’s fan, she does not realize it is causing her to shrink until it is nearly too late (38). Adults, however, must work to change consciously, and perhaps can draw more out of this novel as inspirers of change. Parents are traditionally seen

as having the job of raising their children and adults in this role must consciously determine what kinds of rules and decisions their children might benefit from most. These created rules may come from an identity crisis of their own; parents may try to recreate the ideal person they would like to be, something theoretically easier to do on someone who is not one's self. In reading Alice's Adventures, parental adults may understand guiding figures like the Caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat and renegotiate their own restrictions for their children. The guiding figures in the novel inspire Alice's change on her own, the Caterpillar leaving her to pick the end of the mushroom she chooses herself (43) and the Cheshire Cat ambiguously inspiring Alice to choose her own direction (89-90). While Alice comes from a society of rules, Wonderland gives her room to consider these constructs and develop her person around them and independent of them. Alice's adaptation to and want to explore Wonderland releases her from some of the harsh rules her English culture presents.

Alice struggles at first to overthrow the regime of adult-like stuffiness from her mind. First she creates a second Alice with which she discusses matters concerning decisions, Wonderland, and herself. This is a way in which Alice can both dissociate herself from the improper decisions she might make as well as convince herself to make the correct decisions. It is likely that Alice uses this method as a creative outlet to explore herself and combat loneliness in the same way that many children create imaginary friends for companionship. Alice usually talks to her cat, Dinah, and, because Dinah does not accompany Alice to Wonderland, Alice's second personality seems to encompass what Dinah would otherwise do for her. One side of Alice

seems to show reason, while the other is more whimsical and nonsensical. The tension she feels in the need to follow rules and break them is shown clearly in these starkly split personalities. “‘ 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) [...]” (32). Superficially, Alice attempts to give herself “ very good advice,” the way a good girl in mid-nineteenth century ought to do, but the less reasonable, more emotional side of her tends to prevail, giving way to irrational and perhaps nonsensical behavior.

Alice relies on herself to make sense of the things around her, but she also falls under the influence of her surroundings often. She comes into Wonderland because of her curiosity of the White Rabbit, who follows proper social protocol in the most nonsensical way possible: he is a non-human being with entirely realistic human traits and very adult-like behavior, like worrying about the time. “[...] Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it [...]” (26). Alice’s curiosity about this creature gradually brings her into the nonsense of Wonderland in an instinctual, childly way; Alice does not consider the consequences of her actions in following the Rabbit. The Rabbit is, in many ways, like the person she is being brought up to become: he is free, playful, and wild by nature like a child but, under the jurisdiction of the Queen and the society that she creates, much like the adults in Alice’s world, he is constrained by time, pesky clothing like the gloves he loses, and worry. This is an easy way for

Alice to enter the world of Wonderland as a place parallel, yet opposite, of her own England.

As Alice encounters more characters, her interactions become more personal and less connected with her English society. Firstly, on a superficial level, the Mouse and the rest of the animals involved in the Caucus Race relate strongly to Alice's dry schooling and poke fun at it through their winded history lesson and insistence on social law (46). After Alice delves deeper into Wonderland, however, she discovers more about herself and, as the child reader follows along, they also question their identity. The caterpillar inquires into Alice's person and probes her identity, less connected to her superficial and societal self and more connected to her actual being. He connects with her as he asks the same questions she has about herself and forces her to contemplate them. When he seems confused about who she is, Alice replies, " I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly, [...] for I can't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing" (67-68). The Caterpillar's interaction with Alice may be the most important in setting her up to discover her identity with the many questions he poses, left unanswered. These unanswered questions may cause frustration in the child reader but also hold a certain truth, as childhood identity is subject to change and cannot be answered in a simple statement. On a still deeper level, Alice's identity is challenged when she encounters the Duchess nursing her baby. Her true moral character is put to the test, determining whether she will accept the societal norms of this strange culture or rescue the baby against the system. She rescues the baby, but it turns into a pig, displaying how social constructs are in place for reasons, like

preventing the child from becoming a pig, though often these reasons are senseless, as the boy makes a better pig than a child (87). Child readers may find the bending of social constructs in this way fascinating as they discover what is proper and what is not in their own world; the idea that these rules may be flexible or created by people is a realization that gives the child reader a great deal of autonomy in dealing with their own life. As Alice comes into her own with her identity and society at large, so does the child reader.

Alice begins to come full-circle after the scene with the pig in her relationship with social constructs by beginning to come to terms with new rules and even creating her own. The tea party is demonstrative of chaos organized by rules and Alice attempts to break down this chaos by creating more rules, something that is not productive in this case. She contradicts her company often and offends easily. “‘ I’ve had nothing yet,’ Alice replied, in an offended tone: ‘ so I can’t take more’” (101). Sassy, quipped remarks like these from Alice show a blatant disrespect at the rules apparent in this scene and show her as eager to display her own ideas about social organization. Her attempts, failure at securing stability, and frustration are all relatable to children, who learn from failed attempts most and are forced to try over and over again with different methods. Finally, Alice is definitively set in her authority on societal matters in her dealings with the Queen. She interrupts the Queen halfway through Her Majesty’s demand to decapitate Alice. “‘ Nonsense!’ said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent” (109). This outspoken stance against authority resonates with the growing child reader as they take into consideration the constructs in place and their

reasons for being there. Not only does Alice attempt to speak up in this scene, but also she manages to successfully take control of the situation, at least temporarily, displaying contempt for an unjust social order and the potential for applying this kind of rational to any other situation.

Alice does eventually realize the importance of rules in some sense, as long as they have a clear purpose. When dealing with children, this is a very common element to their demands; they must understand why something is being done. Alice attempts to go along with the Queen's strange croquet rules for a while, for she realizes that no one will benefit from her upsetting them. Eventually, though, Alice comes to the conclusion that rules are often made to benefit some people over others. “‘ I don't think they play at all fairly,’ Alice began, in rather a complaining tone, ‘ and they all quarrel so dreadfully one can't hear oneself speak – and they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them – and you've no idea how confusing it is [...]’” (113). This question of fairness is also often apparent in child's play and young readers may relate further to Alice through her analysis of this unequal footing. Alice's frustration with the unjust nature of Wonderland and societal rules brings her to think more autonomously about the nature of regulations. “‘ I won't have any pepper in my kitchen at all. Soup does very well without – Maybe it's always pepper that makes people hot-tempered,’ she went on, very much pleased at having found out a new kind of rule” (119). Her desire to find new order in life brings her back to the understanding that rules must stem from the need to keep fairness and order and to end cruelty, not to restrict freedom or trample fun. Alice ends her story with a definitive court trial in which she has a strong

personality and definitive answers for every question posed. Thus, Alice is brought back into an orderly society with a very different and much-needed perspective on it from the events and characters she encounters in Wonderland.

Alice needs Wonderland to understand her society the same way many children and adults may want or need an alternate world, not as a form of escape, but as a form of discovery for the self and philosophical topics. Discontent and longing in reference to social order in Alice's English world are apparent from beginning to end of this novel, though they are mostly over by the end with the satisfaction of Alice's return from Wonderland. In fact, the novel opens with a blatant statement of discontent and longing:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. (25)

The opening two paragraphs tell us much about the story to come. Firstly, it clues in the reader to Alice's background in school and learning. She is frustrated with traditional academia and considers finding something more fulfilling to fit her whimsy. Just as she attempts to muster up the motivation to pursue this desire, a new, better version of a supplement appears before

her. Thus, Wonderland is entirely created out of need and desire for Alice, by Alice. She is too lazy or exhausted to execute her idea of picking daisies, so the easier option is to sleep and imagine a different place to entertain and satisfy her. This speaks to Wonderland's lack of didacticism for Alice; the style is created to fit her own needs. This makes Wonderland accessible for all; the ease with which she obtains her state of delirious enchantment is simple and merely imaginative. While Wonderland can be understood and enjoyed by all, child and adult readers may understand it differently through the lens of the respective societies of peers in which they live. The different experiences of Wonderland for a child and adult can be seen through Alice's sister's version of the world at the end of the book. Alice's sister "[...] sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality [...]" (163). The reader can sense the sadness in the sister's experience; she only "half believes" in Wonderland, an experience far estranged from Alice's very real discovery and exploration of it in her lively imagination. Alice's sister's perceptions of reality and the social constructs that bind her to it are so strong that she is unable to entirely separate herself from it to enter Wonderland. Alice's child-ness, however, gives way to more possibilities for her future and more time for her to discover what she has not yet learned about reality, allowing for full immersion in this fantastical, whimsical world. Alice's sister is more grounded and timid to explore her identity than Alice, who is eager to delve into the rabbit-hole.

By the near end of the novel, Alice is more sure of herself than she was before; other characters' prodding and confusing remarks do not move her in

her steadfast decision to know herself and explore her identity on her own terms. Alice disregards the Duchess's comment, "[...] ' Be what you would seem to be' – or, if you'd like it put more simply – ' Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise'" (122), which she would not have been as likely to do at the beginning of the novel. Alice's careful consideration of the " who," " what," and " why" of societal etiquette bring her to the ability to be nearly fully autonomous in her decisions. Because she understands the way society is constructed she is able to question authority when it is unjust and submit to petty rules that may have no significance other than keeping a bit of order. Carroll takes his readers on a journey through a Wonderland of jumbled rules that ends in the same society in which it began, yet the reader feels different. Carroll's intricate posing of deep inquisitions and topsy-turvy situations may not leave the reader with a definite understanding of their identity, but it does at least leave the reader considering the question: " Who am I?"

Works Cited

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