

The other in the looking glass

Business



Ryszard Kapuscinski, author of *The Other*, discusses the idea of seeing oneself in another person, a concept dubbed seeing the 'I' in the Other.

When a person meets someone new, he must bear witness to this Other, seeing and accepting the different qualities of the Other and simultaneously learning about his own defining qualities. Kapuscinski writes that, "to understand ourselves better we have to understand Others, to compare ourselves with them, to measure ourselves against them" (19). Bearing witness to Others allows people to learn about both themselves and individuals from other parts of the world. Lewis Carroll's classic, coming-of-age novel *Through the Looking Glass* elucidates Kapuscinski's ideas, and is about a young girl, Alice, who falls through a looking glass and enters a topsy-turvy world opposite her own, filled with unique characters such as the Red and White Queens, Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledee, Tweedledum, and the White Knight. Kapuscinski's ideas about the Other are showcased in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* through Alice's encounters with the inhabitants of the looking glass world, which allow her to come to a better understanding of her own identity in relation to the people she meets, and let her conceptualize her own world in relation to the looking glass world she is visiting.

As a young girl, Alice's curiosity is one of her most defining characteristics, causing her to be more open-minded and willing to meet new people in the looking glass world. The first dialogue Alice has with looking glass individuals is with the talking flowers in the Red Queen's garden, and through this conversation Alice learns that the practicality she has been taught in the real world will be of no use to her in trying to understand the looking glass world,

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which seems to be founded on nonsense. Alice's exchange with the flowers shows hostility and shock on the parts of both sides, "' We can talk,' said the Tiger-lilly, ' when there's anybody worth talking to.'/ Alice was so astonished that she could not speak for a minute... ' And can all flowers talk?'/ ' As well as you can,' said the Tiger-lilly. ' And a great deal louder'" (Looking Glass 98).

Alice cannot comprehend the flowers' ability to talk, just as they do not understand that Alice is a human girl, thinking that she is a flower, showing the figures Othering one another. Alice's encounter with the Unicorn later in the novel occurs in a similar manner, with Alice never having seen a Unicorn, and the Unicorn never having seen a human girl. "' Well, now that we have seen each other,' said the Unicorn, ' if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?'" (Looking Glass 145). The main problem Alice faces is her inability to understand the looking glass world, because, now that she has begun maturing, she is losing some of her childlike innocence and naivete, therefore trying to use sensibility from the real world, where she is surrounded by adults, to understand the looking glass world, which, because it is founded in nonsense and disorder, cannot be understood in the first place.

Alice is forced to let go of her inhibitions, but she continues trying to find some semblance of order in the looking glass world, unable to accept that there is no order there at all. Alice continues Othering the characters in the looking glass world, and likewise they continue Othering her. Instead of aimlessly wandering about the country, Alice learns from the Red Queen that the land is divided like a chessboard, and that if she reaches the Eighth

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Square, she herself may become a Queen. James R. Kincaid writes, “ Alice... knows from the start that she wants, above all, to be a Queen ...Since Alice is, from the very beginning a figure of power in the looking-glass world...we are seldom asked to pity her” (94). Alice’s goals are now crystallized, so her curiosity and desire to meet new people in the looking glass world is limited only to the individuals she encounters on her way to becoming Queen.

Even when she does meet new characters, she is not as friendly towards them, talking to them only to ask for help in her journey. Kapuscinski writes, “ if I fail to make the effort to notice or to show a desire to meet—we shall pass each other by indifferently, coldly and without feeling, blandly and heartlessly” (35). Alice does have a desire to meet new people, but she is not as innocent as she once was, so she interacts with looking glass inhabitants partly due to her curiosity and childishness, and partly because of her innate desire to understand the world around her and bear witness to it, a desire that has come about because of her growing up and newfound need to know her own identity in relation to the rest of the world. However, Alice is not the only one trying to come to terms with her own identity, because the looking glass individuals are also learning about themselves in reaction to the differences between themselves and Alice. When Alice encounters Tweedledum and Tweedledee, they doubt what Alice holds most dear: the knowledge of her own existence. ““ Well it’s no use your talking about waking him,’ said Tweedledum, ‘ when you’re only one of the things in his dream.

You know very well you’re not real!” (119). Before this particular statement, Alice already has had several experiences in which her identity comes into

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question, for instance, her exchange with the Gnat before walking through the forest in which everything loses its name. In her conversation with the Gnat, Alice states that names are only useful for those who provide them, in other words, “ For the Gnat, names allow for recognition, establishing community and personality; for Alice, they are impersonal categories, useful only insofar as they give power to those who know the names” (Kincaid 98). Alice’s meetings with the Gnat and Tweedledee and Tweedledum give Alice the knowledge about her own identity, because they teach her that reality and truth is subjective, and Alice’s name is only useful if other people acknowledge it as well. Alice is able to affirm her own identity by distinguishing herself from the looking glass characters, and is able to gain a different perception of reality by understanding the differences between herself and the figures she meets.

Another of Kapuscinski’s important ideas depicted in *Through the Looking Glass* is the mutability of language, shown by Alice’s encounters with the Red Queen and Humpty Dumpty. Both encounters are rather spontaneous, yet these prove the most important lessons for Alice, teaching her to be careful about what she says and to take responsibility for her words and how they affect the Other. In her encounter with Alice, the Red Queen says, ““ You may call it ‘ nonsense’ if you like,’ she said, ‘ but I’ve heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!”” (Looking Glass 101), a statement that teaches Alice about the lack of absolute definitions in the English language. This need for opposition to provide definition is not only shown in language but also reflected in reality, because Alice’s meeting with the Red Queen allows her to affirm her own identity in

the looking glass world as an invader who can only earn power and dignity by first showing respect to all the looking glass individuals. Alice does not come into the world as a Queen, but has to become a Queen, and she could only become a Queen through the help of all the people she meets, because she tries to be polite to them instead of totally alienating them, gaining their respect as well.

When Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, his snooty attitude is the epitome of Othering in *Through the Looking Glass*, because he refuses to accept Alice and the way she perceives the world, despite the fact that Alice is trying to be kind and understand him. He tells Alice, ““ When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean- neither more nor less”” (*Looking Glass* 135). He puts himself as the master of language, placing himself on a pedestal and putting Alice, who is already confused enough about the mechanics of the looking glass world, at even more of a disadvantage in trying to understand her surroundings. Kincaid writes, “ Humpty then continues the attack of the Red Queen and the Gnat on the autonomy of language and the notion that its understanding gives power. In his wild assertion that man can be absolute master of the meaning of the words he uses, he joins with the other characters in attacking Alice’s smug linguistic certainty in order to maintain the integrity of the individual personality” (96). Basically, Alice, in trying to bear witness to the Others in the looking glass world, faces the problem that because she cannot understand the complexity, or lack thereof, of the looking glass world, she cannot really properly comprehend its inhabitants.

The idea that language gives power to Others elucidates this problem, because Alice is not a master of language, and thus fails to establish a good

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relationship with either Humpty Dumpty or the Red Queen, two figures that hold a great deal of power in the looking glass world. Alice's struggles to understand the backwards looking glass world are exemplified by her encounters with the White Queen and the White Knight, the only two figures who return Alice's friendliness. When Alice meets both of these figures, she is kind to them out of choice, because there is no reason to treat them otherwise. Kapuscinski writes, "It is the situation, the circumstances, the context, that decide whether we see a person as enemy or as partner at any given moment" (21), showing Alice accepting the Other, despite the fact that she cannot understand the Other or his/her world. In conversing with the White Queen, Alice learns about the looking glass world, "'Living backwards!' Alice repeated in great astonishment, 'I never heard of such a thing!'/ 'But there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways...a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked" (Looking Glass 123-124). The White Queen and White Knight are the only characters Alice forms a sort of friendship with, because, unlike the other characters, these figures do not reproach her, but are more kind and open with her.

By the time Alice encounters the White Knight, who rescues her from the Red Knight, Alice is so close to becoming Queen that she is indifferent towards his kindness and sympathy. They do not completely alienate each other, but she is not very curious about him, because she has already been in the looking glass world for some time now. He tries to recite poetry to her, which she ignores, only trying to become Queen, but, when she finally does gain this title, she is Othered by the Red Queen, even though the White Queen

tries to defend her. Alice's relationship with these two figures allows Alice to learn about herself, and the world around her. Alice never really becomes comfortable in the looking glass world, not even after becoming a Queen, despite the fact that this world is of her own creation, showing Alice Othering herself. According to Kincaid, " She is now Queen Alice and joins with the other two in an image of mindless power.

The book ends with a wild and disturbed scene of predation, where the pudding and mutton speak and threaten to change places with the guests and begin to eat the eaters" (99). At first, the life behind the looking glass is not as frightening as Alice thought, although it is confusing and intimidating, being filled with such strange individuals. However, when Alice is Othered even after gaining power, she cannot take it anymore, violently waking up from her dream. Even when she becomes a Queen herself, the Red and White Queens still hold more power than Alice, because they understand how their own world functions, and can bear witness to the individuals of their own country and can thus know their own identity, whereas Alice, who spends more time in her dream world than in reality, cannot bear witness to the Others of the looking glass world and therefore has difficulties affirming her own identity there, and also in relation to the adults she is surrounded with in the real world. She does not fit in, and is Othered not only by other people, but also by herself, in both the imaginary looking glass world, and in reality.

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* illustrates Kapuscinski's ideas about bearing witness to the Other as a means of discovering one's identity and understanding the world, shown by Alice's curiosity concerning the <https://assignbuster.com/the-other-in-the-looking-glass/>

looking-glass world and her encounters with the various individuals that live there, allowing her to come to better terms with herself. In her meetings with the talking flowers, the Red and White Queens, the Gnat, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Humpty Dumpty, and the White Knight, Alice is able to learn about herself by distinguishing herself from each of these characters. The story also shows Alice Othering herself because she is maturing, and is stuck in a rite of passage where she does not fit in with her childlike dream world anymore, but is too young to belong in the sensible adult world. Through the Looking Glass shows a world that is so disorderly that it has its own sort of order that is unintelligible to the practical adult mind. This nonsense is the exact problem that Alice faces, yet, at the same time, being in this chaotic world is exactly the lesson that Alice needs, to affirm that she belongs in reality, no matter how out of place she feels, because she can no longer retain control and power in her own dream world.