

# Political themes in the stories Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll essay



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These two of the greatest works in English literature are known for being read in so many levels. It will be not surprising for the sensitive theme of politics to be touched while reading a literary work that is on the same literary plane of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass. Although many argue that the works of Lewis Carroll were written primarily and solely for the enjoyment of children, the design of his works are so intricately made to seem like they are for only intended for children—that intricateness in design is the very evidence that his works are also meant for the part of the society that can exude deeper understanding and deeper readings. To put it in simpler terms, Lewis Carroll had deliberately designed the dreamlike world of Wonderland to have an escapist nature because he knows that an escape is what people of the conservative and stiff Victorian society demands.

Yet the great irony there is that the dreamlike world of Wonderland functions more as an eye-opener that are focused on the bitter realities of politic-based societies. Those who claim that the tow stories, "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" have overlooked the fact that people (in the case of the stories, the characters) will always be products of their societies.

Through that thought, we can assume that each of the individuals/characters Moreover, to support the claim that the world of Wonderland is interspersed with political thought—and counter that they are solely written for the amusement of children—both stories are incorporating nursery rhymes within the narratives. Nursery rhymes are just seemingly innocent with good-natured language and topics. It just seems that the only function of nursery  
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rhymes is to amuse children, but according to critic Charles Matthews they are originally designed for political commentary, criticism, and even protest (Matthews 43).

Perhaps the most notable incorporation nursery rhymes in the story “Through the Looking Glass” is the character of Humpty Dumpty “Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall / All the king’s horses and all the king’s men / Couldn’t put Humpty together again” (Carroll 111) The character of Humpty Dumpty can serve as an allusion to a stable state of society that was once on top of the “wall”, but after Humpty Dumpty broke into several pieces, that stable society can’t be pieced again together.

Humpty Dumpty’s shell could be a representation of a unified political power equally enjoyed by all members of the society. But that once unified shell had broken into several pieces that can’t be pieced together by the efforts of the king (the government) and the king’s men (military power). The real question there is that, are they really trying to piece back the once stable and unified society? And are they willing to distribute the political power among all members of the society regardless of all possible factors?

Nursery rhymes are of course not the only method that Lewis Carroll had used to incorporate some political discussions in his works. It is very noticeable that there are differences in the settings of the two stories, but actually these differences allude to the same topic of politics. In the story of “Alice in Wonderland”, the main protagonists of the story are portrayed as half-playing cards and half-people as we can see in the characters of the “

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Queen” and the whole of her card-people retinue. As we know the common playing cards, it is a game of higher and lower powers.

The basic playing cards are comprised by familiar representations of political power, like the Queen and the King, and several (although numbered still) nameless and relatively powerless cards. A deck of playing cards can represent the basic political structure of the society. There will always be fewer individuals who wield the political power than the majority of the populace who remain powerless despite of their number. Even within the higher stratus of political power, there is an unequal distribution of political power.

According to Robert Polhemus, the character of the Queen is definitely the principal explicit authority figure in “ Through the Looking Glass” (Carroll ed. Gardner) It is very obvious that the Queen of Hearts definitely has the more dominant political power as she is even in control of the King of Hearts, the Knaves of Hearts, and even the non-card people in wonderland. On the other hand, “ Through the Looking Glass” is also based on a common past-time, chess. This game is not entirely different with the concept of playing cards, it is also about a game about power.

As also shown in the story, there is also a Queen, King, and individuals who have the same function as the knaves. But the portrayal of politics in this story is much more explicit than in the story of “ Alice in Wonderland. ” The character of Alice became a “ pawn”, the most vulnerable and powerless piece in the game. Alice becoming a pawn in the story touches the

discussion of politics because she is the protagonist of the story, the character of Alice is the one whom the reader will empathize with.

The effect will be that Alice will be set against those of higher political power, the Queen and (again) her retinue. The readers are presented a seemingly escapist story, but they are actually shown their real position in the society. Just like Alice, they move one square at a time, the concept of progress is almost impossible. Their lives are just waiting to be consumed by those who wield political power. A possible reason why Lewis Carroll had incorporated playing cards and chess in "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" is because these are favorite pastimes of the common people.

They can relate more to them because the incorporation of these games gives a certain taste of reality that is deliberately lacking in these works of Lewis Carroll. Moreover, this becomes Carroll's critique of politics because his known government is after all a monarchy. Again, Lewis Carroll had expressed his view of the political system of his time in "Through the Looking Glass" by the scene where the Red Queen had changed in size instead of Alice "She's grown a good deal...and there she was half a head taller than Alice herself! (Carroll 138) A possible interpretation of that line is that a person of higher political status will always be more dominant than those who are devoid of political advantages. That line could also allude to the ever-growing power of the higher strata of the society as they steal the privileges that are meant for the people, in the case of the story—Alice.

**Abuse of Political Power** The theme of politics is rarely discussed without mentioning abuse of political power, the works of Lewis Carroll are no exception.

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Abuse of political power is almost displayed in an explicit manner by the Queen of Hearts with her famous habitual phrase " Off with his head! " (Carroll). What Lewis Carroll had done to shroud this relatively offensive (but with truth) political critique is by characterizing the Queen of Hearts as a comical character. Lewis Carroll's design was so effective that this was almost not visible to locate. The repetitive order of the Queen to behead whoever she wants becomes comical as opposed to the harshness of the reality behind the concept of beheading. The stories also reveal to the readers the constant manipulation done by politicians.

In the story " Alice in Wonderland" there is the character of the Caterpillar who is constantly asking Alice nonsensical questions. There is a scene where the Caterpillar had asked Alice the question " Who are you? " Alice had replied: " I...I don't know Sir just at present I know...at least I know who I was when I got up this morning but I think I must have been changed several time since then...I can't understand myself to begin with and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing" (Carroll 43-44) That scene is just a representation of the communication between the people and the politicians.

Through the use of confusing, but nonsensical, language that can't be immediately understood by the general public, the people get lost halfway leaving them vulnerable for manipulation from opportunistic power-grabbers. The character of Alice expresses the sentiments of the general public after being subjected to political brainwashing and manipulation through her inquiry " I wonder if I had changed overnight? Let me think... was I the same when I got up this morning? " (Carroll 15) That line of Alice exudes a sort of

powerlessness of the general public after being subjected to the “politicking” of abusive politicians.

Lewis Carroll also touched the topic of the use—or rather the abuse of military power to maintain political control. This topic was expressed by the dialogue of Alice and the Red Queen in “Through the Looking Glass.” The two characters were talking about a dog and a bone. The Red Queen had asked Alice a sort of riddle “take a bone from a dog, what remains?” The dog in that dialogue becomes a symbolism of military power. It is observable that dogs are not present in the world of Wonderland. Alice is also seemingly afraid of the dog so the dog can be representation of something that generates fear.

The Red Queen proclaimed all the answers of Alice as wrong. For the Red Queen the only answer is the temper “then if the dog went away its temper would remain! The Queen exclaimed triumphantly” (Carroll 284) The reader could easily relate the tone of the Red Queen to the tone of political dictators and tyrants when they say that their political powers still has an effect even when it seems it can't. The line of the Red Queen could almost translate as “no escape” for those under a political dictatorship or tyranny.

Note that the Red Queen had expressed that line “triumphantly. To have such tone is very typical for political power abusers to strike fear in the hearts of their constituents. That politically designed fear will erase doubts in their political supremacy and functions as a precautionary measure for possible subversion. The issue of abuse political of political power will be incomplete without touching the discussion of corruption. Politics as a

concept will always be associated with the concept of corruption, it simply can't be helped. In the story of "Alice in Wonderland" the issue of corruption was expressed by the character of the Mad Hatter.

The scene was the famous Mad Tea Party where Alice and the Mad Hatter had this interesting exchange of lines pertaining to the issue of corruption: the March hare had told Alice to take some more tea when actually she had none. The Mad Hatter had butted in "you mean you can't take less...it is very easy to take more than nothing" (Carroll 79) that line just expresses the reality that wealth in the society is unevenly distributed within those with political inclinations and those who don't have political representations.

The readers could be reminded here by the triangle diagram that is much used by sociologists to describe the imbalance in terms financial and political privileges as shared by the members of the society. Those deprived of financial and political privileges will always remain at the bottom at the triangle while a very small portion of the society, the rich and the powerful remain on top. Discrimination and marginalization Discrimination and marginalization has always been a much discussed and disputed political issue. The works of Lewis Carroll "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" had also touched this political topic.

One example of a scene where the issue of racism could be touched is when the character of the Pigeon was intrigued when Alice had eaten an egg—the discussion was comically driven to the conclusion that Alice is actually a serpent (Carroll 54-60) Food can be an item that represents racism in political discussions. It is a prejudiced stereotype that the food that a person



eats is closely associated with race. The comparison of Alice to a serpent maybe loosely translated to the association of the foods fried chicken and gravy to Black Americans.

The foods fried chicken and gravy as a food of Black Americans have been prevalently used for highly offensive racist jokes. Susan W. Wong had pointed out that in the case of the narrative of " Through the Looking Glass" , the issue of race and class was ingeniously hidden by Carroll beneath the scene of The Garden of Live Flowers. The variety plants appear to represent the different kinds of people of different social statuses. The common daisies seem to represent the common people while the more rarer Tiger-lily and the Rose are the representatives of the social group with wealth and political privileges.

It is normal for a society to be divided in political power that is unevenly distributed among social classes. The daisies in the Garden of Live Flowers are much like the common people because when they are silenced by a more politically individual the daisies even turned white because of fear. (Wong) A prejudiced society can be described as having high regard for social classes and political stature. The characters in " Alice in Wonderland" had shown to the readers how class is regarded within the society.

This regard for social and political stature was expressed most notably by the character of the White Rabbit and the Duchess. The common rabbit is regarded as an animal that is typically shy and elusive, but not the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland. The character of the White Rabbit is particular with the social class of the person he is dealing with actually he is a bit prejudiced

individual. This negative trait is revealed when he is set to interact with the other characters. The White Rabbit treats the characters he is interacting with differently according to their social and political stature.

When the White Rabbit was interacting with Alice and other characters without high political and social stature, he is sort of a lording them with an undeniable air of superiority. That social treatment is radically shifting when the White Rabbit is set to interact with characters of high political and social stature such as the Queen of Hearts. The White Rabbit is almost panicking whenever he is to meet with the Queen. On the other hand, the White Rabbit had even mistaken Alice as one of his housemaids just because of Alice's appearance.

Another character that is radically changing social behavior when set to interact with different individuals of different political and social stature is the Duchess. The first time that the Duchess had met Alice, the Duchess was sort having an unpleasant behavior. But in the course of the story, these two characters will meet again but this time in front of the Queen. The Duchess radically changed behavior towards Alice as the Duchess became pleasant when talking and treating Alice. Money In the real world, money has always been a basis for political power. There is even a well-known saying that claims money is what makes the world go round.

This claim is also true for the society of Wonderland. Even the technical subject of capitalism is touched by Carroll's stories. There is a scene in the story "Through the Looking Glass" wherein a guard is selling tickets for a certain amount of money that Alice doesn't have (Carroll 182) What that

scene wants to communicate is that even in the dreamlike Wonderland things come with a price just like it works in real life. Alice also had the same problem with capitalism when she wanted to ride the train and she has no money to pay for the ticket. The conductor of the train refuses to let Alice aboard the train because she has no money.