Trapped in wonderland

Lewis Carroll’s Adventures in Wonderland provides a physical removal from reality by creating a fantastical world and adventure in the mind of a young girl. In this separation, Carroll is able to bend the rules of the temporal world. Although this is self-evident in Alice’s physical transfigurations, language and conventions provide additional means to test if a world can defy the rules which are didactically fed to children and become second nature to adults. Perhaps it might be an inescapable outcome given that Carroll has been educated in a world that operates within structured seta of rules, but the “ wonderful dream” seems to be peculiarly similar to the “ dull reality” which Carroll attempts to escape (98). Fantasies seem to be forever bounded by what reality allows the mind to imagine.

The opening scene provides a possible metaphor for Carroll’s artistic endeavor in the face of these constraints:

Alice seems quite capable of seeing that a more beautiful world exists beyond the confines of her environment. By making a distinction that it is her head, the physical location of the mind, which prevents her from proceeding, Carroll suggests that the mind provides the barrier to entering the Eden-like grounds of pure beauty. Alice’s subsequent struggle to physically transform herself to squeeze within these boundaries mirrors Carroll’s endeavor to gain entry into the unbounded imagination. Adult consciousness becomes comparable to the “ rat-hole” in which Alice finds herself trapped. By grounding the narrative in the eyes and imagination of Alice, who is just beginning to be inculcated with lessons and physically removing her from the temporal world, Carroll adjusts the conditions of his adult world to explore if childhood presents the only opportunity or the “

key” to the access the imagination. Yet even as he changes the parameters of the world and the eyes of the beholder, his endeavor appears doomed to failure; when Alice finally locates the garden, she finds that her conception of perfection is tainted. As the gardeners paint the red rose-tree white, Carroll’s vision of beauty becomes subject to the same forces that dominate reality.

Alice’s youth creates the possibility of viewing an alternate world through eyes not completely corrupted by the social conventions of reality, but her efforts to retain Victorian manners when her new environment creates no pressures to do so, suggest how deeply the rules of the world are impressed upon the mind during childhood. Alice’s language is steeped in the artificiality of her world. Her stilted words, “ You sh’n’t be beheaded,” reflect that the training of her schooling is not even abandoned in a moment of apparent crisis (65). In many instances, Alice even tries to transfer her conception of proper manners to this new environment. She finds it “ decidedly uncivil” that the Footman looks up at the sky all the time he is speaking (46). She seems to be almost willing to forgive his rudeness if only he could answer her question, “ But what am I to do?” (46). Alice’s rejection of the Footman’s response, “ Anything you like,” represents Alice’s willingness to exchange one set of behaviors for another under the condition that she is told how to behave and act, indicating that it is not the actual manners that she values but the freedom from deciding what to do (46). It is at this moment that Alice seems to be rejecting the opportunity for freedom of the imagination and instead opting for the safer boundaries created by the dictates of reality.

Although Carroll succeeds in altering the content of Alice's new education, her systematic attempt to recall her schooling further indicates that her mind has become so conditioned to being told how to act and respond to situations, that it is unable to break out of this trap, even when the possibility presents itself. Just after Alice recalls, " When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that this kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me," she realizes that " there's no room to grow up any more here" and concludes that this means that will always " have lessons to learn" (29). The transition of Alice's thought from fantastic stories directly to lessons and books suggests that her imagination is never able to escape the confines of a instruction; she believes that as a child it is her duty to be concerned with schooling (29). She even self-imposes lessons as she " cross[es] her hands on her lap as if she were saying lessons and began to repeat it." (16). Perhaps Alice will achieve grown-up status when she has been so conditioned that the mantras of the educational systems become immediate responses. It is almost as if in projecting his conception of a nonsensical world, that the child, simply by being a product of what Carroll despises, namely a world of socially constructed regulations, forms an obstacle to escaping reality.

Carroll faces a difficulty in allowing his own imagination to escape reality. He creates a mocking parody of the lessons of Alice's reality in the Mock Turtle's informative speech of the educational material of the Wonderland, but never is able to transcend the idea that a world must be ruled by instruction. Carroll's new world might study " Reeling and Writhing" or " Arithmetic-Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision," instead of the traditional

subjects, but inhabitants of Wonderland are still trapped by the process of rote which removes free thought from the educational experience (76). The rules, as the lessons, are certainly different in this imaginary place, but only to be replaced by an entire set of new ones. The croquet game epitomizes how Carroll can only create an alternative reality by constructing a world based upon oppositions to that in which he lives. For instance, in normal croquet there are distinct rules, whereas, in Wonderland " they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them" (67). The new rules consist of disobeying the old ones. Perhaps fantasy can never escape man's tendency to use his own experience as a starting point to craft change. In this case, an author's imagination as well as those of his characters will be forever grounded by reality. In order to examine what a world look like without rules, one must first understand what a world looks like with rules. Alice's preoccupation with rules materializes in her comment " that's not a regular rule: you [the King] invented it just now" (93). Thus, even if Carroll changes the rules, Alice remains trapped in her desire to define them, creating a further obstacle to exploring how an unlegislated land would operate.

All of the characters which Alice encounters simply seem to be replacements of the adults that Alice encounters in reality, and it is these figure who serve as the teachers of these new lessons and rules. The characters continually change the rules and use language as a weapon which Alice seems to be continually trying to understand. The Duchess is contradictory, condescending, and hopelessly pedagogical. As the Mock Turtle stands on the ledge of a rock to tell his story while Alice sits in front of him, the

environment mirrors that of Alice's classroom in which a teacher positions himself in front to deliver lessosn. Tuttle even adopts a schoolmasterish tone of voices as he tells Alice, " Really you are very dull." (75). Leach suggests that "[t]hey behave to her as adults behave to a child-they are peremptory and patronizing" (Leach 92). In creating these characters, Carroll is unable to escape the notion that children require instruction and need adult-like figures to enforce rules. Carroll's criticizes the tradition educational system by using Wonderland to parody its flaws, suggesting that even in his mind he finds issues of the imagination and reality inseparable.

The sardonic tone which accompanies Alice's observation of Wonderland's inhabitants and customs, reflects that Carroll is only too aware of the fact that his dreamland is only a distorted version of reality. Peter Coveney suggests that the " dream takes on a quality of horror because Carroll " is painfully awake in his own dream" (Coveney 334). Although Carroll attempts to veil his dissatisfaction with reality in Alice's innocence, he almost seems to be testing Alice's consciousness of his suffering:

It was all very well to say, " drink me," but the wise little Alice was not going to do that in a hurry. " No, I'll look first," she said, " and see whether it's marked ' poison' or not"; for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because the would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; if you cut your finger very deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked " poison," It is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later. (11).

The insinuation of both suicide and self-inflicted pain seems an incongruous reflection for a seven-year-old; Alice becomes a vehicle through which Carroll reveals his preoccupation with such tortuous thoughts. As Alice proceeds to drink the bottle that is mysteriously labeled “ drink me,” Carroll toys with a distorted version of attempted suicide (11). He is able to guise his attempt in Alice’s innocence, revealed in her childlike recollections of poisoning, which leaves her unaware of the gravity of the consequences of drinking bottle that might contain poison. It seems quite morbid that Carroll chooses to place Alice in a situation which would cause her to even contemplate such violent images. Rackin suggests that Carroll’s particular genius “ depends heavily on his uncanny ability to enter fully the mind of childhood, to become the child who dreams our adult dreams” (Rackin 113). Even if Alice can not fully comprehend the suggestions that Carroll plants in her head, the author appears fully conscious of the consequences of poisoning.

While the incident with the mysterious bottle marks Alice’s initiation to Wonderland, Carroll’s decision to culminate his tale of Wonderland in a legal courtroom creates a fitting environment to for his final attempt to use youthful imagination to escape reality. The narrative even admits “ very few girls of her [Alice’s] age knew the meaning of it all,” and by placing Alice in the pinnacle of worldly law, he implies that she too, even in her imagination, is answerable to the rules of reality (86). The courtroom scene seems more of a trial of the imagination rather than an investigation of the identity of the tart thief. The Queen’s directive, “ Sentence first-verdict afterwards,” (96) reveals Carroll’s own feelings of entrapment. He has been sentenced to growing older and living within the rules of society only to acknowledge that

the verdict has always been against the imagination; his construction of “ stuff and nonsense” appears to be precluded by a societal conditioning against the imagination (97). It seems odd that Alice awakes to declare this as a “ wonderful dream,” when moments earlier she is overcome with anger about the injustice of the Queen and King’s tyrannical court, potentially creating a serious indictment of the reality she awakes to. A second possibility is that it is Carroll voice pronouncing the word “ wonderful,” wishing just like Alice that he could respond to society’s dictates, “ Hold your tongue!”-” I won’t” (97) just as Alice had done minutes earlier.

Alice’s continued determination to persevere in this world of nonsense, and more specifically, her willingness to point out its weaknesses might help to explain why Carroll undertakes what he consciously seems to believe to be an impossible mission- to escape reality. From the outset, Alice is characterized as believably human- she is rude, impatient, and repeatedly naÔve in her observations. Yet it is her flaws that allow us to identify with her as a representative of our own entrapment in reality. Her youth presents an opportunity for the audience and Carroll to revisit the naÔve belief that there is an escape to our everyday experience and furthermore, that with a methodical, logical approach it is possible to understand our environment. Although Alice is frustrated by the new reality that she encounters and its resistance to her systematic way to comprehend it, in spite of all of her difficulties she optimistically continues her pursuit of the garden. On her second attempt, she confidently asserts with the little golden key in hand, “ Now, I’ll manage better this time” (61). In her search for escape and

understanding, she becomes “ the naÔve champion of the doomed human quest for meaning and lost Edenic order” (Rackin 96).

Perhaps Carroll is suggesting that in the face of an earthly surface peppered with disappointment, anger, and frustration, adults must retain the resiliency and unaffected consciousness of Alice. Her ability to awake and immediately go to tea, “ thinking while she ran, as well she might what a wonderful dream it had been” provides a demonstration of this survival mechanism in operation (98). There seems to be no distinction between her dreamlike world and her living world; her imagination neatly blends into reality, suggesting that we too must follow Alice’s example of how to deal with nonsense as we transition from Alice’s world to our own reality. Alice’s inability to reflect upon Wonderland is what allows her to energetically proceed to her next encounter. Her retort, “ Who cares for you?” Ö” You’re nothing but a pack of cards!,” functions as an immediate dismissal of unfairness and injustice and brings the issues to a close (97).

If there was indeed a moral of Alice in Wonderland, believing that Carroll is only trying to tell us that we must all retain our naive innocence in the face of reality, would be to collapse the interpretation of his work into one of the maxims espoused by the Duchess. Carroll appears to recognize the impossibility of such a quest and interestingly enough it is one of the Duchess’ statements that provides complications to this hypothesized moral:

The use of the world “ imagine” recalls the difficulty of avoiding the reality that childhood cannot be an eternal state, and despite our attempt to escape the experiences of reality, they will always prevent us from recreating a

state of innocence. The reality is the force that requires us to be true to ourselves; we cannot pretend to be children and Carroll's suicidal frustrations create consequence enough to avoid this disillusion.

Carroll makes a futile attempt to model Alice's optimistic behavior. Although it is Alice's sister who undertakes the effort to enter Wonderland, Carroll's narrative voice appears to pervade her thoughts. Carroll acknowledges that an adult realizes that the dream is based in reality. It is in this way that he creates the relationship between childhood and the imagination. As discussed earlier, like an adult, a child is unable to imagine life much different than his current reality, but the difference is the consciousness of these restraints. Unlike Alice, her elder sister, Lorena, can only " half believe herself in Wonderland," and quickly identifies all of the elements and sounds of Wonderland as ones originating in her own world (98-99). Alice's Wonderland contains these same elements, but she is able to explore them without the awareness that each illusion has a mundane real life parallel; she is unable to see that the Queen's shrill cries is really the voice of the shepherd-boy. It is with a mixture of nostalgia and bitterness that Carroll guarantees that Alice will someday find herself removed from these fantasies: " she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days" (99). This is the only passage that Carroll truly believes it is possible to imagine anything removed from his immediate environment, and ironically, this vision serves as an attack on imagination because it projects the inevitable end of Alice's dreamlike fantasies. As Lorena falters in her attempt, it appears that childhood presents the opportunity to believe that

one has the freedom to imagine before it becomes evident that the only illusion is that which the child possesses: the belief the imagination is separate from reality.

Coveney, Peter. “ Escape” The Image of Childhood. London. 1967.

Leach, Elsie. “ Alice in Wonderland in Perspective” Victorian Newsletter. 1964

Rackin, Donald. Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass: Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning. New York: Twaine. 1991.