

The quest for self in alice in wonderland



In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll tells the story of a young girl's journey through a world of fantasy, imagination, and inner transformation. Alice begins as a seven-year-old girl who falls down a rabbit-hole and finds herself in a place called Wonderland. However, while Alice is supposed to be a child, the reader can easily follow her seamless development into adolescence from the upward trajectory of her thoughts, her actions, and her reactions from other characters.

Ultimately, as Alice vacillates between child and adolescent in her quest for identity, the reader witnesses the inner journey of a child who intuitively knows that there is more to life than others may expect her to understand, and her curiosity takes her on a journey through the mind, heart and soul that leads her to a place of poignant understanding and sublime wonderment.

Alice's quest for identity and understanding is shown through the characters she engages with and the different phases in life that they represent. While the science-based functionality of developmental theory may initially appear to be incongruous with the examination of a fictitious character, Carroll demonstrates his "professional familiarity with his child protagonist through the logic and consistency of his depiction of Alice" (Karlsson 1). Alice's movement from child to adolescent help readers to understand the process that occurs as a child is on a quest for identity and moves into adolescence sometimes sooner than is expected due to the nature of her questions and the interactions she is exposed to. As she searches for her identity on her quest for purpose and meaning, we see the multifaceted nature of Alice's personality, "as her childlike qualities of curiosity and sciolism are

contrasted with adolescent cognitive abilities” (Karlsson 13). For example, she does not regard adults in too high regards, She does not have high regards of adults, considering how “unreliable, unfair and judgmental the adult characters are who she meets” (Karlsson 2). Her childlike nature appears strongly here.

As Alice moves through her quest for identity, we see that not only does she face the obstacle of age, but of gender as well. Her experiences show how children can experience frustration when “asserting agency in a world in which girls are constrained and destined to enter a circumscribed domestic realm” (Flynn 84). The process from childhood to maturity is largely psychological and oftentimes spiritual, “to the point at which the main character recognizes his or her place and role in the world” (Karlsson 1). The word little carries with it a diminutive meaning, which emphasizes her childlike nature. For example, as Alice sleeps in her older sister’s lap, the sister thinks to herself how “little Alice” will one day grow up to have children of her own (Carroll 109). Another example is when the Queen of Hearts wants to punish Alice for speaking to her so “loudly and decidedly” (Carroll 68). However, Alice survives because the King tells the Queen, “Consider, my dear: she is only a child” (Carroll 69). If Alice were not a child, she would have suffered a very different fate and had immediately been subject to capital punishment. Here we see that the child in Alice is still frustrated by how she must be subject to the rules of adults around her, which emphasizes her childlike nature.

The book is a powerful emotional and intellectual tool that can help both children and adults to “test various real-life roles and engage in critical and

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imaginative examination of themselves” (Flynn 83). As Alice examines and explores herself and the world, we, too, are able to do the same, and to experience the quest from child to adult. As a child, she engages in processes that are amplified during adolescence, including “ introspection, self-consciousness and intellectualization” (Karlsson 7). Like an adolescent, Alice is able to observe herself from a higher perspective, saying to the Gryphon “ it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then” (Carroll 88). More examples of her highly developed inquisitive nature include when she experienced drastic changes in size by eating and rinking. She meets the White Rabbit and asks herself, “ I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!” (Carroll 11). Questions like this lend the reader to explore the deeper meaning within seemingly superficial situations such as these, and to ask the same questions about one’s own place in the world and the fixed-or-fluid nature of growth and identity.

After following Alice “ through her identity mayhem,” Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland ends with Alice waking up in her older sister’s lap and the reader realizing that Wonderland was just a dream (Karlsson 13). The bigger question, however, arises as to whether Alice will continue to live in the reality she came from with her older sister, or the reality that she just left in Wonderland. She will continue to live through the “ simple sorrows” and “ simple joys,” which signals that even though it was a dream, her awareness and consciousness was forever changed during her quest (Carroll 110).

Overall, we see that Carroll understood the nature of development within young people, and sought to depict the color and fluidity of such a quest for self within the context of a young, unknowing seeker of the truth.