

# Alice's existential adventures in wonderland



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Jennifer Geer's article "All sorts of pitfalls and surprises': Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll's Alice Books," discusses at length the implications of Lewis Carroll's novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, on the development of the child. Through this article Geer stresses that Victorian fairy tales, and specifically Alice's nonsensical journey through wonderland "foster the happy, loving childhood that will enable her development into a good woman and mother"(2). Though it is beyond a doubt, true, that Alice is a children's story, the article also explains that in terms of Alice's adult readers, the novel simply shares "innocent amusement"(2). A close reading of Alice, however, shows that the novel is much more than a simple children's story; it can appeal to an adult audience as well. Alice's continued futile attempts to find meaning in wonderland's meaningless world, her eventual encounter with the nothingness that wonderland is, and her final realization of her freedom at its conclusion mark Alice as a true existential hero and proves that Alice can be read by adults as an existential novel, one which provides a drastically different interpretation than simply an appreciation of the development of a child. Throughout the course of Alice, several instances and situations she comes across during her journey illustrate her continued and failed attempts to force meaning on the absurd world of wonderland. From the instant she falls into the rabbit hole, which marks the beginning of her journey, Alice immediately begins to try to use reason to understand and give meaning to her long fall. For example, Alice begins by stating to herself, "' I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time? [ . . . ] I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down [ . . . ] but then I wonder what latitude of longitude I've got to?'"(20). This statement marks Alice's

initial attempt to make sense of her fall, even though she is endlessly falling into a rabbit hole—something that obviously does not make any sense to begin with. As Gordon E. Bigelow states in his article, “ A Primer of Existentialism,” “ Reason is impotent to deal with the depths of human life,”(172), and Alice's use of reason, namely her attempt to use latitude and longitude to “ measure” her fall, prove her failure to recognize this fact as she falls (quite literally) further and further into the depths of wonderland. This failure of reasoning only marks the beginning of Alice's attempts to impose meaning and rationality on wonderland and is also a main characteristic in marking her as an existential hero. As Alice finally finishes her descent into wonderland and continues on her journey, she makes her initial recognition that wonderland is, indeed, much different from her “ above-ground” world, but Carroll's juxtaposition of this recognition with Alice's application of above-ground rules and logic to a world that clearly does not have any also helps in demonstrating Alice's continued existential journey. For example, after Alice comes across the “ eat me” and “ drink me” food and realizes that she can use it to alter her size, which obviously is a situation she has never encountered above wonderland, she voices her recognition of this confusing world as the narrator states, “ She had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way,” and also through her statement, “ “ Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! [ . . . ] if I'm not the same, the next question is, “ Who in the world am I?”(28). These lines show that Alice has realized that wonderland is not the same as life above ground, yet she still tries to apply her above world logic anyway—something that simply cannot work in an existential novel. Another

example of this mistake occurs when Alice begins to get a glimpse of the “ reality” of wonderland’s world of illogic and lack of meaning, but immediately reverts to using the meanings that she does know, saying, “ “ I’ll try if I know all the things I used to know. Let me see: four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen [ . . . ] Paris is the capital of Rome [ . . . ] no, that’s all wrong, I’m certain!””(28). The fact that Alice cannot even recite true facts illustrates the uselessness of above ground “ truth” in wonderland, and the fact that her recitation of “ meaningful” facts do nothing to help her allude to the fact that Alice is indeed battling against a world that in itself is meaningless. Though these instances are, as Greer contests in her article, amusing, and can simultaneously provide adult readers with a shared innocence and laughter at Alice’s child-like reactions to her experiences, at the same time, these innocent reactions are so prevalent throughout the novel that they can and must be interpreted as something more, specifically as the continuous construction of Alice as an existential hero through her inability to recognize her own reality and the meaninglessness of wonderland, and her continued attempt to battle through its absurd world. Another aspect of wonderland that Alice is unable to find meaning in is the actual words spoken by the inhabitants, as Alice attempts to interpret them by her above ground understanding. This lack of understanding of the inhabitants of wonderland also show Alice’s isolation from them, which is, according to Bigelow, another major characteristic of an existential hero— alienation from the world and also those in it. For example, after Alice and a variety of woodland animals get soaked by her tears, a mouse apparently discovers an ingenious way to get dry, shouting, “ I’ll make you dry enough!”(34), and immediately begins to quote a story out of a history

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textbook, which he believes is the driest thing he knows. Alice, obviously confused by the mouse's different interpretation of the word "dry" states, "but it doesn't seem dry to me at all!"(34). Through this situation, Alice demonstrates her inability to understand the lexical ambiguity in the word "dry," and attempts to understand the word the only way she knows how to. This failed interpretation of meaning not only shows the meaninglessness of Alice's preconceived logic, but it also frustrates and angers the mouse, and thus highlights Alice's alienation from those around her. Another example of Alice's failure to correctly understand the vocabulary used in wonderland occurs when the mouse says to her, "' Mine is a long and sad tale'"(37). Alice replies, " It is a long tail, certainly [looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail] " but why do you call it long?"(37). It is at this point where the Mouse becomes infuriated with Alice's misunderstanding, and claims that she " insults him for talking such nonsense"(38). Though Alice claims she did not mean it, she is once again isolated from a character in wonderland, and simultaneously a victim of her inability to apply her above ground meanings to wonderland—she can't even understand the language that she thinks she knows, which only leads to further confusion and isolation. Another major part of Alice that characterizes it as an existential novel is the variety of chaotic and absurd behaviors that the creatures of wonderland demonstrate, and Alice's judgment of these creatures and their actions on a rational objective basis, rather than through simply accepting wonderland's absurdity. For example, as Alice is having a conversation with the Frog-Footman, out of nowhere, a large plate comes hurtling through the air, barely missing his head. However, due to the irrationality that characterizes wonderland, the Frog-Footman is obviously accustomed to the insane

happenings, and he continues speaking “ exactly as if nothing had happened”(60). Alice, on the other hand, becomes increasingly frustrated by the Frog-Footman's ridiculous actions and words and instead tries to force some kind of rational order onto the crazy happenings by dismissing the Frog not as a creature whose actions fit his world, but as “ perfectly idiotic”(60). Alice's inability to recognize the absurd world she is now a part of and futilely apply her rational logic to it also is demonstrated in the same scene when Alice comes across the Duchess who is singing, “ Speak roughly to your little boy, and beat him when he sneezes: he only does it to annoy, because he knows it teases”(62). Then, as the Duchess throws the child to Alice, it morphs into a pig. But Alice, still bound by her rational thought, “ felt it would be quite absurd for her to carry [the pig] any further”(64). Later on, Alice also tries to find meaning in the Duchess's absurd actions stating, “ Maybe it's the pepper that makes people hot tempered”(80). This line continues to show Alice's inability to accept the irrationality in wonderland and her attempt to find meaning in it, and also sparks anger in the Duchess, who is yet another character Alice becomes isolated from as well. Alice's encounter with the Cheshire Cat provides readers with a vocalized statement of the reality of wonderland, and yet still, Alice refuses to see and accept it and continues to search for meaning anyway. For example, Alice states to the Cheshire Cat, “ I don't want to go among mad people,” and the Cat cunningly replies, “ Oh, you can't help that . . . we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad”(65). This quote from the Cheshire Cat is a blatant statement of what wonderland consists of and gives Alice a glimpse of the meaning that she had been attempting to seek in wonderland so far, yet she still cannot grasp it at this point. This inability to grasp the Cat's meaning is

also stated in the line following his insight as the narrator says, " Alice didn't think that proved it at all: however she went on[ . . . ]"(65). This line refers to Alice's continued effort to speak to the cat and find meaning in his words, but it can also be understood as a representation of Alice's inability to recognize wonderland's absurdity as vocalized by the cat and her continued effort to " go on" through wonderland on her quest for meaning. The conclusion of Alice, and especially her experience in the garden, highlight her eventual realization of its reality and the freedom she has to act, which is a necessary component in an existential work. For example, upon Alice's arrival into the garden she is threatened by animate cards during her croquet game and says, " They're only cards and I needn't be afraid of them!"(79). This line demonstrates that Alice is becoming increasingly close of the freedom that she possesses in a land of meaninglessness, but the fact that Alice only mutters this revelation to herself also shows that she still has not yet grasped the implications of a realization like this—that she holds the ultimate freedom in wonderland and can, if she chooses to, wake up and instantly end its absurdity. As the novel continues, so does Alice's knowledge of wonderland's meaninglessness and the power that she holds over its inhabitants because of it. For instance, as the Queen shouts yet another meaningless threat of " Off with her head!" to Alice, she replies " " Nonsense!" very loudly and decidedly""(82). After this surprising moment of defiance, the Queen remains uncharacteristically silent and must be comforted by the King who says, " Consider my dear, she is only a child"(82). However, just when it appears as if Alice is realizing that wonderland means nothing and she indeed has the power to be rude to the Queen, she once again illustrates her ultimate failure through the lines, " Alice began to feel

uneasy[ . . .] “ What would become of me?””(83). Once again, Alice becomes afraid of what will happen to her for being rude to the Queen—she can't see that she is the person who holds the ultimate power. This statement of anxiety is also another major characteristic of existentialism. According to Bigelow's article, each of us must make moral decisions in our own lives which involve the same anguish. [ . . . ] decisions have to be made in fear and trembling[ . . . ] sometimes one must make an exception to the general law because he is (existentially) an exception, a concrete being whose existence can never be completely subsumed under any universal (176). This line helps to demonstrate that Alice's brief recognition but immediate reversion from it through her statement of her fear illustrates that she has not quite reached the point of her final realization of her freedom, but also shows that her anxiety is a natural part of the existential “ process” that she has been going through that will eventually lead to her statement of her own freedom. Through the Knave of Hearts's meaningless trial that marks the conclusion of the novel, Alice is finally able to have, in Bigelow's words, “ The encounter with nothingness,”(176), and directly following it, is also able to realize the freedom that she possesses—a final mark of an existential hero. Though the creatures of wonderland take the Knave of Hearts's trial very seriously, it is obvious that the trial itself has no meaning because the world that it takes place in is devoid of meaning as well. At first, Alice is excited to take part in the trial—her lack of understanding at this point still leads her to believe that it is something of extreme importance. Alice also demonstrates her application of her above world meanings to the trial as she is “ pleased to find she knew the name of nearly everything there”(103), and also takes her position very seriously when she learns she has to “ testify.” However,

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through the course of the trial, Alice becomes increasingly aware of the meaninglessness in it, and in wonderland itself. Alice's first step in her realization that the trial is meaningless occurs when the Gryphon says to Alice, " They're putting down their names [ . . . ] for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial"(104). Alice immediately replies, " Stupid things!"(104), showing her recognition that the jurors are indeed absurd, and upon looking at the jurors' notepads, she is confirmed as she notices not one of them can even spell correctly. This initial growth in knowledge also sparks Alice's physical growth as well, and as the trial continues and Alice realizes the nonsense that she is being exposed to, both her intellectual and physical growth increase. For example, as Alice is testifying, the King and the White Rabbit quarrel about the correct term to write down, which, obviously, show the irrationality that encompasses the trial. At this moment, Alice notices that the jurymen are also all writing down different words. She then says to herself, " but it doesn't matter a bit"(112). This line can be interpreted as Alice's realization of the meaninglessness of the trial, but also, as her physical growth, paralleling her intellectual growth, is now " two miles high"(112), this line can also allude to the fact that Alice is on the verge of her " encounter with nothingness." The culmination of Alice's physical and intellectual growth through the trial and her final realization that wonderland has no meaning occurs when the members of the court are once again quarreling over nonsensical information and Alice says, " If any one of them can explain it,"(she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting the king), " I'll give him sixpence. I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it"(114). This line of Alice's realization of the meaningless truly marks her journey as existential. Throughout the

course of the novel she had desperately tried to force meaning into a world of meaninglessness, and in the end, she finally reached an epiphany that she had not necessarily set out to look for. The King's next line also verbalizes Alice's failed mission thus far as he says, " If there's no meaning in it, [ . . . ] that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any"(114). This line also serves in " summing up" Alice's long journey to find meaning in a world without any, as well as her eventual " encounter with nothingness," that leads to her final act of the novel—an act of freedom. Throughout the course of Alice, and consequently the course of this essay, the focus has largely been on Alice's thought process and her constant attempts to put everything she came across in terms of an objective reality that she knew. However, her final act at the end of the novel proves the freedom that she possesses and also simultaneously serves in marking the end of Alice's existential journey. As Alice continues to argue with the King and Queen during the trial, the Queen shouts (again), " Off with your head!"(116), only this time around, Alice screams back, " Who cares for you? (she had grown to full size by this time). " You're nothing but a pack of cards!(116). At that instant, the cards appear to " explode" around her and Alice wakes up. This final defiant shout and act of waking up is Alice's ultimate act of free will in a land of nothingness. According to Bigelow, " each man must accept individual responsibility for his own becoming,"(177), and by Alice's choice to defy the nonsense that the characters and wonderland itself threw at her provide the major act that marks her as the novel's existential hero. Bigelow also states, " A man is the sum total of the acts that make up his life—no more, no less—and though the coward has made himself cowardly, it is also possible for him to change and make himself heroic"(177), and by Alice

making her final act to speak out against the absurdity and meaninglessness that wonderland was composed of, and wake up from her dream, she truly proved that she was the sum of her actions. She realized that wonderland had no meaning and consequently that she could not force rationality on it, and she recognized and acted on the free will that all existential heroes possess. Though Jennifer Geer is indisputably true in her conviction that children who read Alice can learn from her development and can become enriched in their own development from childhood to adolescence and on, at the same time, Alice's continued quest to find meaning in wonderland, and the fact that she remained unaware of her futility until the very end also parallels Alice's adult readers "above-ground." Alice leaves wonderland taking no meaning from it, having only learned that the land itself had no meaning to begin with. The fact that the novel ends with Alice leaving for tea and "thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been"(117), puts an entertaining and childish spin on the fact that wonderland actually was not a "wonderful" dream at all, but in reality was a nightmare in which Alice could only escape by her realization that it was absurd and meaningless and through her ability to act on her free will and reject it. Alice was simply a girl, but the complex existential quest she was on, in the end, is really something only an experienced adult can relate to, even if the journey did indeed take place at the heart of a children's novel.

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