

Little Woman in the Realms of the Fantastical: Exploring the Complex Psyche of Alice as Layered and Nuanced by Lewis Carroll

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Abstract : Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are often celebrated for conquering the summits pertaining to the literary prospects of phantasmagoria. Fancy and whimsy together play a balancing dance as the little woman treads the strangest realms and meets a battalion of hostile quirks in quick succession. Yet, beneath the vibrant surface of these seemingly innocent children's stories lies a rich and enigmatic labyrinth of psychological, social, and philosophical themes. Alice, the protagonist, is more than just a curious child; she represents the complex psyche of a young girl navigating the boundaries between reality and fantasy, societal expectations, and her developing self-identity and patterns of thinking as well as cognition. The paper focuses on closely following Alice, the little woman within the backdrop of an unfamiliar world, which is at once fantastical and weird, quite too wild to be tamed inside a play pen.

Catchphrases:

Phantasmagoria: a sequence of real or imaginary images like that seen in a dream.

Fancy: Exploration of the unreal, curious, dream-like,

Whimsy: Unpredictably vivacious and quirky

Little woman: Being a seven year old, Alice presents herself to be a woman-in-the-making and at times, a proto-feminist as well.

Psyche: The human soul, mind, or spirit.

Cognition: The mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.

Text

What a curious feeling!

Carroll unleashes the illustrious thread of Alice through the craving for such a 'curious feeling' voiced at the very outset by Alice herself, who, in the intro scene, is seen in the company of the governess, arithmetic and the mundane. The account on the genesis of the Alices seems to be as curious as the beginning of a fairy tale, anticipating enormous scope of keeping ennui at bay.

"Her face has got some sense in it, though it's not a clever one!" (TLG 122)

The illustrious Alice was born out of an afternoon fancy of its author for which the sweet cajoling of three little girls including the eponymous figure of inspiration became the potential spur. Swift and spontaneous as the rendition was, the petite listeners wanted the tale to be continued, a story that "drained /the wells of fancy dry" (Carroll, xi). However, the story extempore by the tell-tale clergy man was due to win hearts across boundaries and centuries, to become an all-time favourite classic. An entire world of "happy voices" seems to make the reverberating cry "It is next time!". Alice appears to be the immortal muse of the bliss associated with childhood, its mirth and laughter, when these are invoked for their own sake. Nevertheless one should be lost in the myth that the whole Alice was composed in a single day followed by the marvellous afternoon. In the beginning of the third chapter of his book *The White Knight*, Alexander L. Taylor warns the world against such a probable foible. He produces both the evidence and the cause behind the spread of such a fallacious notion:

Dodgson's diary for 4 July, 1862, bears the entry: 'I made an expedition up the river to Godstow with the three Liddels; we had tea on the bank there, and did not reach Christ Church till half past eight' ...he added, 'somewhat later', the words, 'on which occasion I told them the fairy tale of Alice's Adventures Underground, which I undertook to write out for Alice. (41)

The myth that he composed the whole of Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* on a single afternoon and wrote it down word for word afterwards is partly due to the poem which Dodgson himself prefixed to the published story and partly due to Collingwood's rather naïve statement: 'His memory was so good that I believe the story as he wrote it down was almost word for word the same that he had told in the boat. The whole idea came like an inspiration into his mind, and that sort of inspiration does not often come more than once in a lifetime. Yet the story behind the making of Alice mattered a little within the realm of appreciation. As popularity and celebration have attained that level of saturation wherein Alice, the curious child, got entry into the archive of myths and beyond that, the more volatile realm of commercialization which has metamorphosed her to be a brand itself.

Harold Bloom in his prolegomenon to the anthology of multifarious readings of Alice, got it right in commenting that "Lewis Carroll is Shakespearean to the degree that his writing has become a kind of scripture for us" (1). Disney Alice has become a kind of trade mark for the fanciful tastes of little girls. When it comes to the critical reception, Alice and her *Wonderland* have triggered enormous bulk of writings, interpretations galore ranging from the novel being a pronounced fantasy tale to doubts of its author possessing a derailed if not perverted mind. Needless to add, Alice in *Wonderland*, the one single work that lifted itself to the

apogee of fame and currency, remains to be the only one of its kind within the genre category Literary Nonsense to have achieved this that too outshining its own sequel *Through the Looking Glass*.

Though originally written for children, the Alice books are not in the least an ambitious endeavour. Also, neither is it a neatly chalked out composition much premeditated upon involving longer periods of inspiration, conception, and execution. On the other hand, Alice, the fanciful child and the fantastical Wonderland are twins born of the author's afternoon fancy. It is quite interesting to note that a truly loved classic of all times and all age groups came out as the product of a moment's fancy. Sir Walter Besant's statement as quoted by Derek Hudson in his biography of Lewis Carroll proves to be perennially germane in this regard:

...the only child's book...can be read with equal pleasure by old and young....It is also the only child's book of Nonsense which is never childish though it always appeals to a child; here there is no writing down to the understanding of a child, though it can always be understood by a child. It is, in a word, a book of that extremely rare kind which will belong to all generations to come until the language becomes obsolete. (Hudson 9)

Intended for the thorough entertainment of the little trio of fantasy lovers, Carroll's ambition never transcended the world of children and their enjoyment. However, the fame that was in store for was quite enormous and of long life that it got perverted in the due course that hurled allegations at Carroll with his special liking for little girls being portrayed as sensual. The emergence of the 'Carroll Myth' however was followed by the unceasing duel between the two Carrollian images viz. Carroll, the patron saint of petite girls and Carroll, the deviant pedophile. The degree of truth behind the unpleasant myth is shrouded but chances are great that Carroll may have fallen victim to vested interests, their insatiable hunger for creating sensational grounds for biographies that would certainly burgeon the reading population. Karoline Leach's supplication is relevant at this juncture, "Not only is a radical revision of the accepted biography essential, but study of the myth-making process itself can tell us so much- perhaps more than we are comfortable knowing- about the way we construct our societal and intellectual realities" (Hollingsworth xiii).

However, the reading of Carroll's Alice stories as Nonsense pure and absolute has got practically nothing to do with such controversial issues like the author's sexual orientation. It is desirable to view the texts as quite independent entities and the characters and incidents follow an altogether different logic. The logic that happily permits all illogical versions to the extent of blurring the borderline between the logical and the illogical and questions the very authenticity of its criteria. Carroll as Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson stuttered so clumsily and irrevocably while intruded by a drab convoy of the world 'outside', for example, an adult male visitor. The impact would be a quite painful distraction and dearth of words particularly when he had been in the company of his beloved little girls to whom he had been talking eloquently about the fanciful worlds and people. Isa Bowman, the little friend and later biographer of Dodgson recalls one such incident in one of her memoirs of Lewis Carroll that later got complied by Richard Kelly for his edited version of Alice. Bowman clearly reminisces the incident and describes how Carroll got disturbed and derailed by the unwelcome guest.

He was holding my hand and giving me my lesson in geography with great earnestness when the other man. He greeted him in answer to his salutation, but the incident disturbed his train of thought and for the rest of the walk, he became very difficult to understand, and talked in a nervous and preoccupied manner. (Kelly 264)

The same will be the effect when his whimsical yet delicate manoeuvre is dragged into scandalous issues which are quite irrelevant as far as any research that focuses on the intricacies of the text are concerned that what the author intends to convey becomes very difficult to understand and the nonsense may lose its appeal too. Nonetheless, the real tragedy associated with reading and critiquing Carroll is the mode of approach.

Quintessential Playfulness

Being playful is a lovable trait within the child, but an adult with playful demeanour is sure to be branded childish and carefree if not downright brandishing as crazy. The adult is welcome to the technical scene of play just for matters associated mainly with entertainment, fitness, childcare and sometimes, as part of profession. But no matter how genuine the instinct is, the grown up is just a guest within the juvenile world wherein play proves to be most organic ambience and expression. Within the latter the lack of sense/meaning is 'pardoned' and taken for granted but the former is not 'supposed' to deviate from the thread of sense and when it does, it is either labelled a technique or dismissed at once. Playfulness, however, is not visible as such on or within the characters, because for them, play is as serious as life that adds to the impact of humour being born of it. Thus, the poetics of Wonderland is playful in the sense, the text stages ongoing play as the exact life within. Play permeates everyone and everything within the Wonderland and at every juncture, it does mean business. Ultimately, nothing is there to be spotted within the strange locale which is not part of the game or rather, life/reality and play are inseparably wedded together. Every crisis erupts is attempted to overcome by means of play, the various forms of it. 'The Caucus-Race' conducted to dry up the drenched clothes is a sparkling instance (AAW 31-37)

While exploring the prevalence of 'playfulness' within Alice from cover to cover, the contemporary world offers a happy context to the scholar. The play theory is a recently flourished school fairly peopled, by and with materials galore. Play is portrayed to be fundamental to human nature to the extent that Johan Huizinga rechristens the species to be *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player instead of *Homo Sapiens*, Man the Thinker (ix). The thrust he places on this perspective is quite immense that the book itself is titled *Homo Ludens* (1949). Play is hereby not just a haphazard antic of the light-spirited mind but a productive activity having a method of its own, spreading contagious cheer. One of the pioneering thinkers of the Play theory Friedrich Schiller's take on 'play' substantiates this point. Though he casually defines play as "the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy" (91) the postmodern application of 'play' on the realm of art has observed its potential to be methodical. The roots of the perspective lie deep into the Aristotlean soil, wherein the term catharsis refers to the release of pent up feelings. Going on with the explication, he considers play a symbolic

deed that through which a living being converts the ambience around it to a symbolic representation of the world. Both perspectives look contradictory but the idea of play as a creative force remains intact, lessening the gap between art and play.

Nonsense manipulates the dynamics of play in order to create a world characterized by a different set of rules and logic that ultimately lead to the derivation of pleasure, the only possible corollary to play. In short, Nonsense guarantees the smooth working of the 'play cycle' wherein play delivers pleasure through playfulness.

The various layers of play within the Wonderland and the Looking Glass House are to be unfurled only through a focused critical scrutiny alone. Reading for pleasure, despite being the desirable mode of approach to Nonsense, will only make the perusal a rollicking ride through the land of maximal fun. However, there are a group of critics who ventured out into the real adventure of making the Alices undergo hair-splitting analysis; a task which is as challenging as drawing water in a sieve. One perfect example would be the findings of Lisa S. Ede, who begins it by listing the various themes dealt within AAW, chapter by chapter:

The first four chapters initiate the reader to Wonderland, establish Alice's essential reliability as a guide, and introduce language as a crucial element in the dialectic between order and disorder. Chapters Five through Seven clarify the relationship between language, identity, and meaning... The final chapters of the work, which occur inside the long-anticipated garden, elaborate on what Alice has both lost and gained by her rejection of Wonderland (Tigges, *Anatomy* 153).

The same point is elaborately represented by Wim Tigges within his *Anatomy* in the form of an inventory. This listing of single and final themes for each chapter is against the unwritten code of Nonsense but the more diligent the effort to discover meanings and theme, the more ludicrous is the effect of the Wonderland whimsy. Thus, the themes dealt with include Nature (disruption of order), Measures and Mathematics, Language, Habitation, Communication, Social Order, Games, Ethics and Education, Dance, Justice and the Restoration of order respectively.

As an Epic of Growth

Ede finds 'change' to be yet another encompassing theme within AAW as Alice undergoes quite numerous kinds of it, both physical and mental/cognitive. She journeys through unadulterated curiosity, apprehension, fear, indignation, flabbergast, daring, arrogance and utter defiance as she finds herself to be the mightiest by virtue of 'size' within the Wonderland company. Towards the final chapter, the scene is the Wonderland court, the supposed seat of power however farcical it is, yet for Alice by this time, the entire crew appears to be just a set of pawns, vulnerable to any kind of manipulation according to her own discretion. Nonetheless while pondering over the evolution of Alice, Tigges' 'theme' is duly replaced by Ede with 'play' thus joining the right track with Nonsense: "...Alice's ultimate realization that the world becomes less frightening the larger one is, can be seen as an example of Play with Boundaries, just as the seriality of the growings and shrinkings is indicative of Play with Infinity" (155).

Assuming a general and philosophical tone would add to the burden of the Alice books as they do not, in the 'wildest dreams' mean to mean and make one ascend the sublime levels of thought. In fact, even without such deliberations, the vein of play that fortifies and nourishes the stories can be pulled out for analysis. However, the interpretations are likely to go wild and the chance cannot be written off, that the 'play' in action may be drained of its quintessence. Brian Boyd, while speaking about play in general, warns of such a disaster that can mar the beauty of play. He records within the treatise "Laughter and Literature: A Play Theory of Humour":

It is important to remember that play can persist- and animals that play ant it to- only if it can clearly been seen by both sides as play. The swing and looseness of play expressions and actions must be manifest. Each party needs to know that the other also expects only play, not serious combat, from the encounter. (10)

Boyd talks about the concept of play in general but it surprisingly holds true for the dynamics of play within Nonsense too. The text and the reader can be assumed to be the players at both sides. When a text of Nonsense like AAW lets its plot develop on the sturdy stem of play, the readers and critics too, on their part, are expected to deem it so, as play. Yet this does not mean that serious studies should not be born of play. The kind of play devised by Carroll is fertile enough to kick-start meaty topics for discussion for his version of the play maintains a strange decorum that prevents complete breaking away from logic and fundamental order. The storyline is never at stake and the entire happenings exhibit an unfading aura of order and decorum into which Nonsense permeates as the very soul, tearing it out may leave the text yet another fairy-tale which is hopelessly undone.

Little Alice and the Lacanian

Aligning Alice's psyche with Lacanian discourse would be of depth and profundity. Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage provides a crucial framework for understanding Alice's identity formation throughout her adventures. The mirror stage, according to Lacan, is a developmental phase in which an infant first identifies with their reflection, leading to the formation of the ego. This identification is both a recognition and a misrecognition—the child sees an idealized version of themselves in the mirror, which sets the stage for the ongoing tension between the self and the image. Alice's encounters with mirrors in *Through the Looking-Glass* can be seen as symbolic representations of this mirror stage. When Alice steps through the mirror, she enters a world that reflects, distorts, and challenges her perception of herself. Her identity is constantly in flux, mirroring the Lacanian notion that the ego is never fully stable but is instead a construct influenced by external symbols and societal expectations. The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real Lacan's structure of the psyche—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—can be mapped onto Alice's experiences in Wonderland. The Imaginary relates to the world of images, illusions, and fantasies that dominate Alice's perception of Wonderland. This realm is populated by bizarre creatures and nonsensical events that defy the logic of the Symbolic, which represents language, social rules, and structured reality.

Throughout her journey, Alice oscillates between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. She attempts to impose rationality and order on the chaotic world of Wonderland, only to be thwarted by its inherent absurdity. This struggle reflects the tension between the individual's desires and the constraints of societal norms, a core aspect of Lacanian theory. The Real, according to Lacan, is that which is beyond comprehension, a state of being that eludes language and representation. In Alice's adventures, the Real is suggested by the moments of existential anxiety and confusion she experiences. These moments hint at the underlying void and the limits of her understanding—a theme that is dovetailed with the ineffable nature of the Real in Lacanian thought. Fantasy as a Narrative Tool in Alice's Adventures Escaping Reality or Confronting It? Fantasy in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland serves both as an escape from reality and a means of confronting it. The fantastical elements of the story allow Alice to explore aspects of her identity and society that would be inaccessible in the real world. The bizarre and illogical nature of Wonderland serves as a metaphor for the subconscious mind, where repressed desires, fears, and thoughts surface in distorted forms. The fluidity of time, space, and identity in Wonderland reflects the malleability of the psyche in dreams and fantasies. For Alice, Wonderland becomes a space where she can explore her fears and desires without the constraints of societal expectations. However, this exploration is not without its dangers. The chaotic nature of Wonderland also represents the potential for losing oneself in fantasy, as the boundaries between reality and imagination blur.

Carroll's use of fantasy is not merely an exercise in escapism; it is also a celebrated tool for social criticism. Wonderland can be seen as a satirical reflection of Victorian society, with its rigid class structures, arbitrary rules, and obsession with manners and decorum. The absurdity of the characters and events in Wonderland highlights the irrationality and hypocrisy that Carroll perceived in the society of his time. For example, the Queen of Hearts' arbitrary and tyrannical behaviour can be read as a critique of the authoritarianism and capriciousness of those in power. The nonsensical trials and executions in Wonderland mirror the injustices and absurdities of the legal and social systems in Victorian England. Through fantasy, Carroll exposes the contradictions and failings of a society that claims to be rational and civilized but is often anything but the same in practice.

Alice can be viewed as a proto-feminist and anti-authoritarian heroine who challenges the gender norms of her time. Unlike many female characters in Victorian literature, Alice is not content to play a passive role in her own story. She questions authority, defies expectations, and actively seeks out her own path through Wonderland. Her encounters with the various inhabitants of Wonderland often involve her asserting her own identity and agency, despite the attempts of others to control or define her. Alice's refusal to accept the arbitrary rules of Wonderland can be seen as a metaphor for the feminist struggle against the restrictive norms imposed on women in Victorian society. Her journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment, as she learns to navigate a world that seeks to undermine her autonomy. The Critique of Victorian Femininity The depiction of femininity in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass can also be interpreted as a critique of the idealized image of the Victorian woman. The absurd and often grotesque female characters Alice encounters, such as the Queen of Hearts and the Duchess, can be seen as caricatures of the exaggerated and unrealistic expectations placed on women in Victorian society. These characters embody the contradictions and pressures faced by women, who were expected to be both nurturing and submissive, yet also capable of upholding the moral standards of society. The grotesque and exaggerated nature of these characters serves to highlight the absurdity of these expectations and the damaging effects they can have on women's identities.

In conclusion, Lewis Carroll's Alice offers a rich and complex exploration of the human psyche, societal norms, and the quest for identity. Through the lens of Lacan's psychological theory, Alice's journey is to be taken as a metaphor for the formation of the ego and the ongoing tension between the self and societal expectations. The use of fantasy as a narrative tool allows Carroll to critique the absurdities of Victorian society while also providing a space for Alice to explore her own identity. Carroll's personal idiosyncrasies and social criticisms are woven into the fabric of the story, offering a satirical commentary on the contradictions and hypocrisies of his time. From a feminist perspective, Alice emerges as a proto-feminist heroine who challenges the restrictive gender norms of Victorian society and asserts her own agency and autonomy. Ultimately, Alice's adventures are not just a journey through a fantastical world, but a profound exploration of the complexities of identity, society, and the human experience. Carroll's work remains a timeless and multifaceted commentary on the challenges of growing up, finding oneself, and navigating the often absurd and contradictory world we live in. Alice grows up, feeding on the extremes of fantasy, caprice and the bizarre, equips herself ready to brave the real world by exploring the unreal...

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