

The Department of English

RAJA NARENDRALAL KHAN WOMEN'S COLLEGE

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Offers

COURSE MATERIAL ON:

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

For

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1. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Lewis Carroll: Initiation

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland or *Alice in Wonderland*, as commonly known, is a novel written by English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll in the year 1865. The novel showcases the story of a young girl named Alice falling through a rabbit hole into a subterranean fantasy world inhabited by non-normative, strange and peculiar, anthropomorphic creatures. The novel violates the traditional means of logic-formation and narrative patterns. It is considered to be one of the best examples of the literary nonsense genre.

The success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *Alice in Wonderland* enabled Carroll to forego his activities as a deacon. After the death of his father in 1868, Carroll was able to propose a one-third cut in his salary as a mathematical lecturer. His most famous mathematical work, *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*, had been published the year before, and in 1881, he proposed to resign his academic post so that he could devote full time to writing and pursuing mathematical studies and researches. But in 1882, he was made Curator of the Common Room and was persuaded to remain there until 1892. He continued to write on mathematical topics and completed the first volume of his *Symbolic Logic*. By then, he was independently wealthy as a result of his many successful publications: *Phantasmagoria* appeared in 1869; in 1871, *Through the Looking Glass* came out; in 1876, *The Hunting of the Snark* appeared; and in 1883, *Rhyme and Reason* was published. Carroll's university responsibilities broadened in those years and from time to time he even accepted a request for a sermon. Though his authorship of the *Alice* books was well known, he absolutely shunned *all* publicity and refused to acknowledge any connection to "Lewis Carroll."

2. The Story in Brief and Synopsis of the Text:

The novel is composed of twelve brief chapters; it can be read in an afternoon. Each of the brief chapters, furthermore, is divided into small, individual, almost isolated episodes. And the story begins with Alice and her sister sitting on the bank of a river reading a book which has no pictures or dialogue in it. "... and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" Thus, we find many pictures and read much dialogue (although very little of it makes sense) in *this* novel. After introducing us to one of the creatures in Wonderland, the Gryphon, for instance, the narrator tells us, "If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture." As noted earlier, Wonderland is filled with strange animals, and Alice's encounters with these creatures, all of whom engage her in conversations, confuse her even more whenever she meets yet another inhabitant of this strange country.

Slowly losing interest in her sister's book, Alice catches sight of a white rabbit. However, he is not merely a rabbit; he will be the "White Rabbit," a major character in the novel. In this first paragraph, then, we learn about the protagonist, Alice, her age, her temperament, and the setting and the mood of the story. In a dream, Alice has escaped from the dull and boring and prosaic world of adulthood--a world of dull prose and pictureless experiences; she has entered what seems to be a confusing, but perpetual springtime of physical, if often terrifying, immediacy.

The White Rabbit wears a waistcoat, walks upright, speaks English, and is worrying over the time on his pocket watch. Alice follows him simply because she is very curious about him. And very soon she

finds herself falling down a deep tunnel. For a few minutes, she is frightened; the experience of falling disorients her. Soon, however, she realizes that she is not falling fast; instead, she is falling in a slow, almost floating descent. As she falls, she notices that the tunnel walls are lined with cupboards, bookshelves, maps, and paintings. She takes a jar of orange marmalade off a shelf. But finding the jar empty, she replaces it on a lower shelf, as though she were trying to maintain a sense of some propriety--especially in this situation of absolute uncertainty. As she reflects on the marmalade jar, she says that had she dropped the jar, she might have killed someone below.

Alice is clearly a self-reflective young girl--and she's also relatively calm; her thinking reveals a curiously mature mind at times. But like an ordinary little girl, she feels homesick for her cat, Dinah. In that respect, she is in sharp contrast with conventional child heroines of the time. Although Alice may be curious and sometimes bewildered, she is never *too* nice or *too* naughty. But she is always aware of her class-status as a "lady." At one point, she even fears that some of Wonderland's creatures have confused her for a servant, as when the White Rabbit thinks that she is his housekeeper, Mary Ann, and orders Alice to fetch his gloves and fan.

Thus, in Chapter I, Carroll prepares us for Alice's first major confrontation with absolute chaos. And note that Alice's literal-minded reaction to the *impossible* is always considered absurd here in Wonderland; it is laughable, yet it is her only way of coping. As she falls through the rabbit-hole, for instance, she wonders what latitude or longitude she has arrived at. This is humorous and ridiculous because such measurements--if one stops to think about it--are *meaningless* words to a seven-year-old girl, and they are certainly meaningless measurements of *anything* underground.

In Chapter II, Alice finds herself still in the long passageway, and the White Rabbit appears and goes off into a long, low hall full of locked doors. Behind one very small door, Alice remembers that there is "the loveliest garden you ever saw" (remember, she saw this in Chapter I), but now she has drunk a liquid that has made her too large to squeeze even her head through the doorway of the garden. She wishes that she could fold herself up like a telescope and enter. This wish becomes possible when she finds a shrinking potion and a key to the door. The potion reduces her to ten inches high, but she forgets to take the key with her (!) before shrinking, and now the table is too high for her to reach the key. To any young child, this is silly and something to be laughed at, but on another level, there's an element of fear; for children, the predictable proportions of things are important matters of survival. Yet here in Wonderland, things change--for no known reason--thus, logic has lost all its validity.

Then Alice eats a cake that she finds, and her neck shoots up until it resembles a giraffe's. Suddenly, she is a distorted nine feet tall! Clearly, her ability to change size has been a mixed blessing. In despair, she asks, "Who in the world am I?" This is a key question. Meanwhile, the rapid, haphazard nature of Alice's physical and emotional changes has created a dangerous pool of tears that almost causes her to drown when she shrinks again. Why has she shrunk? She realizes that she has been holding the White Rabbit's lost white gloves and fan--therefore, it *must* be the magic of the fan that is causing her to shrink to almost nothingness. She saves herself by instantly dropping the fan.

But now she is desperate; in vain, she searches her mind for something to make sense out of all this illogical chaos, something like arithmetic and geography, subjects that are solid, lasting, and rational. But even they seem to be confused because no matter how much she recites their rules, nothing helps. At the close of this chapter, she is swimming desperately in a pool of her own tears, alongside a mouse and other chattering creatures that have suddenly, somehow, appeared.

Alice in Wonderland is full of parody and satire. And in Chapter III, Victorian history is Carroll's target. The mouse offers to *dry* the other creatures and Alice by telling them a *very dry* history of

England. Then, Carroll attacks politics: the Dodo organizes a Caucus-race, a special race in which every participant wins a prize. Alice then learns the mouse's sad tale as Carroll's editor narrates it on the page in the shape of a mouse's very narrow, S-shaped tail. The assembled, unearthly creatures cannot accept ordinary language, and so Alice experiences, again, absolute bafflement; this is linguistic and semantic disaster. Indeed, much of the humor of this chapter is based on Alice's reactions to the collapse of three above-ground assumptions: predictable growth, an absolute distinction between animals and humans, and an identity that remains constant. We might also add to the concept of a constancy of identity a conformity of word usage.

But in Wonderland, Alice's previous identity and the very concept of a permanent identity has repeatedly been destroyed, just as the principles of above-ground are contradicted everywhere; here in Wonderland, such things as space, size, and even arithmetic are shown to have *no consistent laws*. In Chapter IV, the confusion of identity continues. The White Rabbit insists that Alice fetch him his gloves and his fan. Somehow, he thinks that Alice is his servant, and Alice, instead of objecting to his confusion, passively accepts her new role, just as she would obey an adult ordering her about above-ground. On this day when everything has gone wrong, she feels absolutely defeated. In the rabbit's house, Alice finds and drinks another growth potion. This time, however, she becomes so enormous that she fills up the room so entirely that she can't get out. These continuing changes in size illustrate her confused, rapid identity crisis and her continuous perplexity. After repulsing the rabbit's manservant, young Bill, a Lizard (who is trying to evict her), Alice notices that pebbles that are being thrown at her through a window are turning into *cakes*. Upon eating one of them, she shrinks until she is small enough to escape the rabbit's house and hide in a thick wood.

In Chapter V, "Advice From a Caterpillar," Alice meets a rude Caterpillar; pompously and dogmatically, he states that she must keep her temper--which is even more confusing to her for she is a little irritable because she simply cannot make any *sense* in this world of Wonderland. Alice then becomes more polite, but the Caterpillar only sharpens his already very short, brusque replies. In Wonderland, there are obviously no conventional rules of etiquette. Thus, Alice's attempt at politeness and the observance of social niceties are still frustrated attempts of hers to react as well as she can to very unconventional behavior—at least, it's certainly unconventional according to the rules that she learned above-ground. Later, Alice suffers another bout of "giraffe's neck" from nibbling one side of the mushroom that the Caterpillar was sitting on. The effect of this spurt upward causes her to be mistaken for an egg-eating serpent by an angry, vicious pigeon.

In Chapters VI and VII, Alice meets the foul-tempered Duchess, a baby that slowly changes into a pig, the famous, grinning Cheshire-Cat, the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and the very, very sleepy Dormouse. The latter three are literally trapped (although they don't know it) in a time-warp--trapped in a *perpetual* time when tea is being forever served. Life is one long tea-party, and this episode is Carroll's assault on the notion of time. At the tea-party, it is *always* teatime; the Mad Hatter's watch tells the *day* of the year, but not the *time* since it is *always* six o'clock. At this point, it is important that you notice a key aspect of Wonderland; here, *all* these creatures treat Alice (and her reactions) as though *she* is insane--and as though *they* are sane! In addition, when they are not condescending to her or severely criticizing her, the creatures continually contradict her. And Alice passively presumes the fault to be hers--in almost every case—because all of the creatures act as though their madness is normal and not at all unusual. It is the logical Alice who is the queer one. The chapter ends with Alice at last entering the garden by eating more of the mushroom that the Caterpillar was sitting on. Alice is now about a foot tall.

Chapters VIII to X introduce Alice to the most grimly evil and most irrational people (and actions) in the novel. Alice meets the sovereigns of Wonderland, who display a perversely hilarious rudeness not matched by anyone except possibly by the old screaming Duchess. The garden is inhabited by playing cards (with arms and legs and heads), who are ruled over by the barbarous Queen of Hearts. The Queen's constant refrain and response to seemingly *all* situations is: "Off with their heads!" This beautiful garden, Alice discovers, is the Queen's private croquet ground, and the Queen matter-of-factly orders Alice to play croquet. Alice's confusion now turns to fear. Then she meets the ugly Duchess again, as well as the White

Rabbit, the Cheshire-Cat, and a Gryphon introduces her to a Mock Turtle, who sings her a sad tale of his mock (empty) education; then the Mock Turtle teaches her and the Gryphon a dance called the 'Lobster- Quadrille.'" Chapters XI and XII concern the trial of the Knave of Hearts. Here, Alice plays a heroic role at the trial, and she emerges from Wonderland and awakens to reality. The last two chapters represent the overthrow of Wonderland and Alice's triumphant rebellion against the mayhem and madness that she experienced while she was lost, for awhile, in the strange world of Wonderland.

This story is characterized, first of all, by Alice's unthinking, irrational, and heedless jumping down the rabbit-hole, an act which is at once superhuman and beyond human experience--but Alice does it. And once we accept this premise, we are ready for the rest of the absurdities of Wonderland and Alice's attempts to understand it and, finally, to escape from it. Confusion begins almost immediately because Alice tries to use her world of knowledge from the adult world above-ground in order to understand this new world. Wonderland, however, is a lawless world of deepest, bizarre dream unconsciousness, and Alice's journeythrough it is a metaphorical search for experience. What she discovers in her dream, though, is a more meaningful and terrifying world than most conscious acts of intelligence would ever lead her to. Hence, "Who in the world am I?" is Alice's constant, confused refrain, one which people "above-ground" ask themselves many, many times throughout their lifetimes.

Throughout the story, Alice is confronted with the problem of shifting identity, as well as being confronted with the anarchy and by the cruelty of Wonderland. When Alice physically shrinks in size, she is never really small enough to hide from the disagreeable creatures that she meets; yet when she grows to adult or to even larger size, she is still not large enough to command authority. "There are things in *Alice*," writes critic William Empson, "that would give Freud the creeps." Often we find poor Alice (and she is often described as being either "poor" or "curious") in tears over something that the adult reader finds comic. And "poor Alice" is on the verge of tears most of the time. When she rarely prepares to laugh, she is usually checked by the morbid, humorless types of creatures whom she encounters in Wonderland. Not even the smiling Cheshire-Cat is kind to her. Such a hostile breakdown of the ordinary world is *never* funny to the child, however comic it might appear to adults. But then Wonderland would not be so amusing to us except in terms of its sheer, unabated madness.

One of the central concerns of *Alice* is the subject of growing up--the anxieties and the mysteries of personal identity as one matures. When Alice finds her neck elongated, everything, in her words, becomes "queer"; again, *she is uncertain who she is*. As is the case with most children, Alice's identity depends upon her control of her body. Until now, Alice's life has been very structured; now her life shifts; it becomes fragmented until it ends with a nightmarish awakening. Throughout the novel, Alice is filled with unconscious feelings of morbidity, physical disgrace, unfairness, and bizarre feelings about bodily functions. Everywhere there is the absurd, unexplainable notion of death and the absolute meaninglessness of death and life.

Alice's final triumph occurs when she outgrows nonsense. In response to the Queen's cry at the Knave's trial: "sentence first--verdict afterward," Alice responds: "Stuff and nonsense! Who cares for *you*? You're nothing but a pack of cards!" At last, Alice takes control of her life and her growth toward maturity by shattering and scattering the absurdity of the playing cards and the silly little creatures who are less rational than she is. In waking from her nightmare, she realizes that reason *can* oppose nonsense, and that it can-- and did--win. And now that the dream of chaos is over, she can say, from her distance above-ground, "It *was* a curious dream," but then she skips off thinking that--for a strange moment--what a wonderful dream it was.

3. Characters in *Alice in Wonderland*:

Alice: Alice is the protagonist of the story. Her adventures begin with her fateful jump down the rabbit hole, and the tale is an extended metaphor for the challenges she will face as she grows into an adult. She possesses unusual composure for a child, and she seems bright but makes many charming mistakes. She grows more confident as the book progresses.

White Rabbit: Alice's adventures begin when she follows the White Rabbit down the rabbit-hole. He is a messenger and a herald at the Court of the King and Queen of Hearts. He wears a waist-coat and carries a pocket watch.

Mouse: Alice meets the mouse while swimming in the pool of tears. He hates cats and dogs, and he begins to tell Alice a disturbing story about being put on trial. He is very sensitive.

Bill: Bill is a lizard in the service of the White Rabbit. When Alice is a giant and stuck in the White Rabbit's house, she kicks Bill out of the chimney. Bill is also one of the jurors at the trial at the end of the book.

Caterpillar: Wise, enigmatic, and unshakably mellow, the Caterpillar gives Alice some valuable advice about how to get by in Wonderland. He smokes a hookah and sits on a mushroom. He gives Alice the valuable gift of the mushroom (one side making her bigger, and the other making her small), which gives her control of her size in Wonderland.

The Pigeon: The Pigeon is afraid for her eggs, and mistakes Alice for a serpent. Alice tries to reason with her, but the Pigeon forces her away.

Duchess: When Alice first meets the Duchess, she is a disagreeable woman nursing a baby and arguing with her cook. Later, she is put under sentence of execution. The Duchess seems different when Alice meets her a second time, later in the book, and Alice notices that the Duchess speaks only in pat morals.

Cook: The Cook is argumentative, and convinced that pepper is the key ingredient in all food. She first appears at the house of the Duchess, where she is throwing everything in sight at the Duchess and the baby. Later, she is a witness at the trial of the Knave of Hearts.

Baby: The baby the Duchess nurses. Alice is concerned about leaving the child in such a violent environment, so she takes him with her. He turns into a pig.

Cheshire Cat: Possessing remarkably sharp claws and alarming sharp teeth, the Cheshire cat is courteous and helpful, despite his frightening appearance. His face is fixed in an eerie grin. He can make any and all parts of his body disappear and reappear.

Hatter: Hatter is a madman who sits always at tea, every since Time stopped working for him. He takes his tea with the March Hare and the Dormouse. Alice is temporarily their guest, although she finds the event to be the stupidest tea party she has ever attended. Later, the nervous hatter is forced to be a witness at the trial.

March Hare: Playing with the expression, "Mad as a March Hare," Carroll puts him in the company of the mad Hatter and the narcoleptic Dormouse. Their strange tea party is at the March Hare's house.

The Dormouse: The Dormouse is another guest at the mad tea party. He can't seem to stay awake. He is also one of the observers at the trial.

Two, Five, and Seven: These three unfortunate gardeners are struggling to repaint the Queen's roses, as they planted white roses by mistake and now fear for their lives. Like the other people working for the queen, they are shaped like playing cards. When the Queen orders their beheading, Alice hides them.

Queen of Hearts: Queen of Hearts is a nasty, brutal, and loud, the Queen delights in ordering executions, although everyone seems to get pardoned in the end. The people of Wonderland are terrified of her. Although Alice initially thinks she is silly, she grows frightened of her. In the end, however, a giant-size Alice is able to stand up to the Queen's temper and her threats.

King of Hearts: Somewhat overshadowed by his loudmouthed wife, the King of Hearts is a remarkably dense figure. He makes terrible jokes, and cannot seem to say anything clever. Alice outreasons him quite nicely at the trial.

Gryphon: The Gryphon, mythical animal that is half eagle and half lion, takes Alice to sea the Mock Turtle. He attended undersea school with the Mock Turtle.

The Mock Turtle: The Mock Turtle is always crying, and he and the Gryphon tells stories loaded with puns. His name is another play on words (mock turtle soup is a soup that actually uses lamb as its meat ingredient).

The Knave of Hearts: The unfortunate Knave is the man on trial, accused of stealing the tarts of the Queen of Hearts. The evidence produced against him is unjust.

Alice's sister: She helps to anchor the story, appearing at the beginning, before Alice begins her adventures, and at the end, after Alice wakes up from her strange dream. Her presence lets us know that Alice is once again in the real world, in the comfort of home and family.

3.1 Character Portrayal of Alice: A Brief Survey

Alice is a sensible prepubescent girl from a wealthy English family who finds herself in a strange world ruled by imagination and fantasy. Alice feels comfortable with her identity and has a strong sense that her environment is comprised of clear, logical, and consistent rules and features. Alice's familiarity with the world has led one critic to describe her as a "disembodied intellect." Alice displays great curiosity and attempts to fit her diverse experiences into a clear understanding of the world.

Alice approaches Wonderland as an anthropologist, but maintains a strong sense of noblesse oblige that comes with her class status. She has confidence in her social position, education, and the Victorian virtue of good manners. Alice has a feeling of entitlement, particularly when comparing herself to Mabel, whom she declares has a "poky little house," and no toys. Additionally, she flaunts her limited information base with anyone who will listen and becomes increasingly obsessed with the importance of good manners as she deals with the rude creatures of Wonderland. Alice maintains a superior attitude and behaves with solicitous indulgence toward those she believes are less privileged.

Alice is reasonable, well-trained, and polite. From the start, she is a miniature, middle-class Victorian "lady." Considered in this way, she is the perfect foil, or counterpoint, or contrast, for all the

unsocial, bad-mannered eccentrics whom she meets in Wonderland. Alice's constant resource and strength is her courage. Time and again, her dignity, her directness, her conscientiousness, and her art of conversation *all* fail her. But when the chips are down, Alice reveals something to the Queen of Hearts — that is: spunk! Indeed, Alice has all the Victorian virtues, including a quaint capacity for rationalization; yet it is Alice's *common sense* that makes the quarrelsome Wonderland creatures seem perverse in spite of what they consider to be their "adult" identities.

The tension of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* emerges when Alice's fixed perspective of the world comes into contact with the mad, illogical world of Wonderland. Alice's fixed sense of order clashes with the madness she finds in Wonderland. The White Rabbit challenges her perceptions of class when he mistakes her for a servant, while the Mad Hatter, March Hare, and Pigeon challenge Alice's notions of urbane intelligence with an unfamiliar logic that only makes sense within the context of Wonderland. Most significantly, Wonderland challenges her perceptions of good manners by constantly assaulting her with dismissive rudeness. Alice's fundamental beliefs face challenges at every turn, and as a result Alice suffers an identity crisis. She persists in her way of life as she perceives her sense of order collapsing all around her. Alice must choose between retaining her notions of order and assimilating into Wonderland's nonsensical rules.

Alice's simplicity owes a great deal to Victorian feminine passivity and a repressive domestication. Slowly, in stages, Alice's reasonableness, her sense of responsibility, and her other good qualities will emerge in her journey through Wonderland and, especially, in the trial scene. Her list of virtues is long: curiosity, courage, kindness, intelligence, courtesy, humor, dignity, and a sense of justice. She is even "maternal" with the pig/baby.

Some critics feel that Alice's personality and her waking life are reflected in Wonderland; that may be the case. But the story itself is independent of Alice's "real world." Her personality, as it were, stands alone in the story, and it must be considered in terms of the Alice character in Wonderland.

4. Thematic Issues and Brief Analysis:

4.1 Symbolism in *Alice in Wonderland*:

Nearly every object in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* functions as a symbol, but nothing clearly represents one particular thing. The symbolic resonances of Wonderland objects are generally contained to the individual episode in which they appear. Often the symbols work together to convey a particular meaning.

Despite its dreamlike qualities, *Alice in Wonderland* tellingly focuses on the journey of the characters as we find in many other fantasy and adventure novels. This journey is not only geographical but also psychological and emotional. In tandem with her journey through Wonderland, Alice progresses toward adulthood, learning to question the orders she receives and to rely on herself.

Alice is on the verge of growing up, and in wonderland, she experiences many bizarre physical changes. Being in wonderland is unpredictable and disturbing at times, much like transforming from a

child to an adult. In the hall of doors, mysterious drinks and cakes give Alice the power to grow and shrink, but she can never seem to get the right size. This endless uncertainty is a visual way that Carroll plots Alice's spiritual journey as she comes to terms with the physical and emotional changes that come with growing up.

The rabbit hole is the place where it all begins. It's Alice's unethical decision to follow the white rabbit that leads to all her crazy adventures. Going down the "rabbit hole" has become a popular phrase in culture, symbolizing everything from exploring new territory or delving into something unknown. This version doesn't exactly take into account the "unthinking" nature of this choice quite enough. Going down the rabbit hole is a one-way trip- the entry, not the exit, to the fantasy world. The rabbit hole represents exploration and a new beginning.

The garden may symbolize the Garden of Eden, an idyllic space of beauty and innocence that Alice is not permitted to access. On a more abstract level, the garden may simply represent the experience of desire, in that Alice focuses her energy and emotion on trying to attain it. The two symbolic meanings work together to underscore Alice's desire to hold onto her feelings of childlike innocence that she must relinquish as she matures.

Like the garden, the Caterpillar's mushroom also has multiple symbolic meanings. Some readers and critics view the Caterpillar as a sexual threat, its phallic shape a symbol of sexual virility. The Caterpillar's mushroom connects to this symbolic meaning. Alice must master the properties of the mushroom to gain control over her fluctuating size, which represents the bodily frustrations that accompany puberty. Others view the mushroom as a psychedelic hallucinogen that compounds Alice's surreal and distorted perception of Wonderland.

4.2 *Alice in Wonderland* as an Allegory:

One popular approach to *Alice* has been to read it as a political allegory, with Wonderland a symbolic England, ruled tyrannically by the Queen of Hearts, who of course would correspond with Queen Victoria. There does seem to be evidence that Dodgson was not over-awed by the Queen (Lurie 5). The extreme violence assigned the "aristocracy" of Wonderland (the Duchess and the Queen) as well as the ridiculous mangling of justice in the Trial ("Sentence first, then verdict"; and indeed, the British justice system at the time was in shambles) are both often used as evidence that *Alice* belongs perhaps more to the genre of Political Satire than even Carroll realized.

Another interesting line of the political approach is treating *Alice* as an allegory for colonization. *Alice* was written during the heyday of British colonization, when the British Empire controlled huge portions of land in Africa and India. Daniel Bivona has written an interesting article comparing Alice to an imperialist, "incapable of constructing...the 'system' or 'systems' that give meaning to the behavior of the creatures" (150).

In a way, Alice is anybody or everybody and the wonderland therefore stands for 'life as a mystery'. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice encounters a series of puzzles that seem to have no clear solutions, which imitates the ways that life frustrates expectations. Alice expects that the situations she encounters will make a certain kind of sense, but they repeatedly frustrate her ability to figure out

Wonderland. Alice tries to understand the Caucus race, solve the Mad Hatter's riddle, and understand the Queen's ridiculous croquet game, but to no avail. In every instance, the riddles and challenges presented to Alice have no purpose or answer.

Even though Lewis Carroll was a logician, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* he makes a farce out of jokes, riddles, and games of logic. Alice learns that she cannot expect to find logic or meaning in the situations that she encounters, even when they appear to be problems, riddles, or games that would normally have solutions that Alice would be able to figure out. Carroll makes a broader point about the ways that life frustrates expectations and resists interpretation, even when problems seem familiar or solvable.

4.3 Critique of the Society in the Mould of Children's literature and Nonsense: *Alice in Wonderland*

The nonsense genre, which involves playing with words and rhyme, writing riddles with no answers, and composing limericks that make no sense, rose in popularity in the nineteenth century. Although English nonsense verse was first invented in 1611 by writer John Hoskyns and then more prolifically used by his successor John Taylor, its use dwindled until its revival in the nineteenth century by authors such as Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Lear primarily wrote absurd limericks intended for children, though many might also contain political commentary. In this era of word games, Lear's nonsensical use of words and rhyme to create not only limericks but near-gibberish stories illustrates the movement towards using this genre, a kind of fantasy, as a harmless escape from life while still tackling larger issues. Lewis Carroll, another master of nonsense verse writing around the same time, brilliantly delivers a critique of the English school system with his character Alice as she constantly misapplies her rote-learned classroom teachings.

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I have fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see; that would be four thousand miles down, I think — " (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) " — yes, that's about the right distance — but the I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.)" [8]

Alice has no idea what latitude and longitude actually mean, but still she persistently tries to demonstrate her knowledge by using these terms, albeit incorrectly. She also shows the inconsistency of her education in her inability to remember the correct words in the verses she had memorized for school. Alice, while quizzed by the Mock Turtle and the Griffin, completely botches the verses they have her recite. "She hardly knew what she was saying" as she "began to repeat" what she had learned in her lessons (82).

Carroll cleverly uses nonsense to criticize rote school learning in a way that would have been impossible to do within the bounds of more serious writing. Since he uses nonsensical fantasy stories to

criticize the English school system, he would not have found himself in trouble for writing something considered offensive. Nonsense, falling greatly on collection and combination of words that do not fit into a regular system rather create one of their own, challenges the conventional structure of thought, and so can easily be used to challenge a reprehensible social system or deliver hidden political commentary. The nonsense genre destructs the logical, coherent view of the world with Symantec mix-ups and linguistic circularity, using circumlocution to effectively conceal the deeper critique.

Traces of many of the social issues and debates of the Victorian era are present in *Alice*. Indeed *Alice* itself may even have helped to shape some of these debates such as the question of how to deal with the education of children. In the Victorian era, children were quite a problem. Often treated as miniature adults, children were often required to perform, were severely chastised, or were ignored. *Alice* has often been read as a satirical attack on children's treatment and education. Alison Lurie argues that the book is radical reaction against the impersonal didacticism of British education, pointing out that "All the adults [in Wonderland], especially those who resemble governesses or professors, are foolish, arbitrary, cruel, or mad" (5).

Another social issue that the Alice books seem to subvert is the role of women in society. Victorians expected women to be the "angels of the home," docile, discreet, and domestic. Alice is none of those things. Lurie calls her "active, brave, and impatient; she is highly critical of her surroundings and of the adults she meets" (7). Yet, other critics have seen Alice as the most Victorian of all the women in the book. Laura Ciolkowski argues that

...the excessive violence of the Duchess, the Hatter's 'rude' remarks, the 'savage' behavior of the Queen become the occasions for Alice to represent Wonderland as an uncivilized country desperately in need of the moral guidance and social instruction that can only be provided by a proper English woman. (7)

Finally, *Alice* is very interesting when read in light of the growing social concern over the treatment of people with mental diseases. Jan Gordon outlines how in the Victorian era an insane person was "appropriated" to the status of a child, which was an improvement over the status of animal, as the eighteenth century would have it (101). Although, considering the marginal identity of children, this still kept them on the furthest edges of society. Thus, considering Carroll's elevation of the child as an "ideal" and his compassionate treatment of the "mad" characters, the March Hare, the Mad Hatter and even the Cheshire Cat, *Alice* can be read as a radical stance for the rights and humane treatment of the insane.

4.4 Women Characters and Feminist Issues in *Alice in Wonderland*:

Alice is an interesting case study for feminist critics. For, although written by a man during the Victorian Era, the book's strong female heroine and her adventures are a veritable gold mine for feminist critics to study. In fact, Judith Little even wrote that the *Alice* books are "almost a comic compendium of feminist issues" (195).

There are two main ways to approach Alice. Either critics have seen her as a feminist hero, a rebel breaking out of the traditional female gender roles, or they are more hesitant to give Carroll the

credit of really breaking any stereotypes. Judith Little and Megan S. Lloyd are both of the former camp. They argue that *Alice* is a “literally ‘underground’ image of a woman resisting the ‘system’ “ (Little 204). They see Alice’s assertiveness, activity, and curiosity as distinctively “Un-Victorian” traits which make her not only an important example of a “subversive” woman, but also, in Lloyd’s view, an ideal role model for our society. Lloyd writes, “[Alice’s] is a reality where women author their own tales, work out their own problems, expect the extraordinary, and speak their minds. Faced with continuing mistreatment and stereotypical expectations, today’s young women do well to ask themselves, what would Alice do?” (17).

However, not all critics are ready to accept Alice’s perceived power so unconditionally. Carina Garland, for instance, argues that the way Carroll describes Alice demonstrates his idea of female sexuality as a “frightening and destructive force” (23). She describes Alice as a slave to whims of the male author and the male characters of the book. For instance, she cites the episode of Alice and the mushroom. The Caterpillar gives Alice the ambiguous instruction that “one side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.” However, as Garland points out, “Alice doesn’t know what the food will do to her, but is told she must eat it...The result...is that the [instruction] completely denies her knowledge and therefore any control over what she consumes and the changes her body undertakes as a result of this eating” (31). In Garland’s view, Alice, the small girl, represents the passive femininity which was a large part of what attracted Carroll to his “child friends,” and in the book is completely controlled by the male powers around her.

Besides Alice, there are only three other women in the entire novel: the Duchess, her cook, and the Queen of Hearts. As these are the most senseless and violent characters in the book it would be understating to say that they don’t come off well. Carroll’s women are among the worst type of women portrayed in literature. They are violent, irrational, frightening. And certainly the Queen of Hearts could almost be read as the “male nightmare”: women with too much power bringing about a chaotic dystopia. This extremely sexist reading implies that women should be kept docile and domestic, otherwise their animal passion would ruin the nation.

Judith Little, on the other hand, sees the violence of the Duchess as the natural psychological result from her being forced to fill role of “mother”: “The peppery kitchen is full of an irritation which seems to grow out of the demands of mother-hood—making soup, tending a baby, and perhaps trying to control a ‘disruptive’.

4.5 Children and Animals:

In an age such as our own, where philosophers earnestly debate the rights of animals, or whether machines can “think,” we cannot escape the child’s affinity for animals. And in *Wonderland*, except for the Gryphon, none of the animals are of a hostile nature that might lead Alice to any harm. (And the Gryphon is a mythical animal so he doesn’t count as a “true” animal.) Most of the *Wonderland* animals are the kind one finds in middle-class homes, pet shops, and in children’s cartoons. Although they may not seem so in behavior, most of them are, really, pets. Alice feels a natural identity with them, but her relationship ultimately turns on her viewing them as adults. So her identity with the animals has a lot to do with her size in relationship to adults. Alice emphasizes this point when she observes that some ugly

children might be improved if they were pigs. In her observation lies the acceptance of a common condition of children and animals: Each is personified to a degree. Thus, it is not surprising that in the world of the child, not only animals, but dolls, toys, plants, insects, and even playing cards have the potential to be personified by children (or adults).

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***Note: I am hereby acknowledging my thorough indebtedness to the resources I have got by accessing these web links and portals in the making of the module. I would advise the students to follow these web links and portals for better understanding of the issues discussed here.**

Appendix

Select Literary Criticism

- **Feminism (In *Alice in Wonderland*)**
-- by Haley Corning

There are many different views that Lewis Carroll portrays through his short novel, *Alice in Wonderland*. One of the main views and criticisms from the novel is feminism.

"Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women." Feminism is a view portraying to the reader of the reality of how gender roles are played in regular day to day life. *Alice in Wonderland* is such a magnificent "case" of feminism because that the novel was written by a man during the Victorian Era.

Some critics have come to agree that Alice may be a "rebel" by attempting to break out of the everyday stereotypes of women. Alice's confidence and curiosity seems to break the shell of a Victorian woman. One critic in particular, Megan S. Lloyd, believes that Alice's traits are a vital characteristic of a revolutionary woman, and also crucially important to "an ideal role model for our society." Lloyd also states that women in today's society seem to rely on Alice and think, "What would Alice do?"

Other critics tend to disagree with Lloyds beliefs. Such as Carina Garland who believes Alice is being portrayed as the "slave" to the men of the novel. She refers to the scene of the mushroom, with Alice and the caterpillar where Alice does not hesitate to go by the caterpillar's instruction. "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter." Although, Garland makes a valid point about the passage, "Alice doesn't know what the food will do to her, but is told she must eat it...The result...is that the [instruction] completely denies her knowledge and therefore any control over what she consumes and the changes her body undertakes as a result of this eating" (31). From Garland's point of view, Alice exemplifies the "passive" feminism and is completely controlled by the dominance over the male control surrounding her.

- **Marxist Criticism (In *Alice in Wonderland*)**
--by Sarah Pumphrey

Along with feminism, Carroll portrays another theme within *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*: the Marxist Theory. Karl Marx worked with theories involving the social classes, and how they act, are educated, and how that has an effect on a people. In Carroll's short novel, a high class is showcased, and parodied. Royals are portrayed as this "mad" and dazed, doing whatever they please. These "heads of society" have followers and servants, who seem to understand their madness, but do not possess it. Literature often uses strong stereotypes, depending on the author's social class. Karl Marx believed that "...stable societies develop sites of resistance: contradictions build into the social system that ultimately lead to social revolution and the development of a new society upon the old" (1088). This statement holds the idea that these contradictions and stereotypes are what our society builds on. Stereotypes in the Victorian Age of England, particularly the upper class, fueled the ideas of Lewis

Carroll.

Although Alice is not a royal, she is portrayed as a young woman of a high class in her time. Her nose is turned up, and she has obviously lived a privileged lifestyle. She gloats her manners, and is proud of all that she has learned in school, and with education being a big part of Marx's societal theory, Alice plays into stereotypes. Alice is proud of herself, being a "great girl" (ch. 2) , and treating herself to luxuries (such as new boots every Christmas) because she believes she deserves them (ch. 2). This may be Carroll making an opinion about the higher classes in society at the time of the novella.

Marx hypothesizes that the tone of literature reflects the authors' own social class. In mind of this theory, one might infer that Carroll is a lower class citizen, as he speaks of the higher classes with sarcasm and exaggerations. However, Carroll was of a family who was high in the church, and Lewis himself received high education at Oxford University. With this in mind, Carroll could be contradicting his fellow high class citizens, as Marx mentions, and becoming aware of the stereotypes that surround him. Carroll portrays his own social class as a snobbish and somewhat slothful body of people.
