Alice in Wonderland (1)

The Features of Children’s Literature; Carroll’s book in context: a typical/eccentric Victorian text
Lewis Carroll

- Pseudonym of Charles Lutwige Dodgson (1832-1898)

- His father was a graduate of Christ Church college, Oxford (where he took a double First, in mathematics and classics)
Lewis Carroll

- **Childhood in Cheshire**
- V. Woolf: “childhood remained in him entire” all his life, persisting as an “impediment in the centre of his being”.
- Dodgson: children are “the three-fourths of my life”
- ‘Solitude’ (poem) invoking “the golden hours of Love’s young Spring/Of innocence, of love and truth”. He would give all his adult wealth “To be once more a little child”
Lewis Carroll

- 1854: C. L. Dodgson graduates at Oxford Christ College (First in Mathematics but not in classics)

- 1855 (“the most eventful year of my life”): starts giving tutorials and lectures in maths in Oxford
1856: Dodgson first photographs the three Liddell sisters (daughters of the Dean of Christ Church; Alice is 3 years old)

Until 1863, he regularly visits the Deanery, takes photographs of the children and take them to ‘expeditions’
An element of duplicity: Reverend C. L. Dodgson and Lewis Carroll

- A dreary college tutor for undergraduates...

- but a skilful child entertainer. The letters to his child friends are full of wit, puns, inventiveness

- Chapter 1: “this curious child was fond of pretending to be two people” (Alice or her creator?)
1862: The Genesis of Alice in Wonderland

- Dogson’s diaries from 1858 to 1862, when the friendship with little Alice was ripening, are lost...

- ...but luckily they resume just in time to record the weeks leading up to the genesis of Wonderland.

- 4 July 1862: ‘expedition’ on Isis (river Thames) with the Liddell sisters
Separation from the real Alice and invention of the fictional one...

- **July 1863**: breach with Mrs Liddell and Dodgson banned from the Deanery
- **1864**: Manuscript of “Alice’s Adventures under the Ground” given to Alice Liddell as a Christmas Gift
- **1865**: Publication of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, with illustrations by Tenniel
- **1872**: Alice Through the Looking Glass
Long has paled the sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die:  
Autumn frosts have slain July. 
Still she haunts me phantomwise  
Alice moving under the skies  
Never seen by waking eyes.

(Alice through the Looking Glass)

The manuscript, with Carroll’s own illustrations  
(British Library, London)
A-i-W: A Mixed Genre

- Partly an adventure story (similar to quest, involving a succession of dangerous situations)...
- Partly a fantasy story...
- ... and partly made of nonsense elements (a fascination with language and language games, puns etc)
- The child figure allows the novelist to critique and subvert the values of his contemporary culture
Carroll and Nonsense

- Examples of nonsense also in Shakespeare’s fools and jesters
- Carroll probably knew the “Nonsensical Story about Giants and Fairies” in Catherine Sinclair’s Holiday House (1839, a Christmas gift for the Liddell children in 1861)...
- ... in which there is the story of a giant so tall that “he was obliged to climb up a ladder to comb his hair”
- Edward Lear, The Book of Nonsense (1846)
Carroll and Nonsense

- Carroll shows that the play with language that appeals to children can be used to amuse but also to subvert.
- Many puns and jokes in the text are mathematical and logical.
- One contemporary critic: “the book furnishes evidence that Mathematics are not inconsistent with writing works of the Imagination.”
Alice and Humpty Dumpty

“How old did you say you were?” Alice made a short calculation, and said “Seven years and six months.”

“Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it.”

“I thought you meant ‘How old are you?’” Alice explained.

“If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty

Nonsense/Maths: Taking words and numbers at their face-value: demystification of social conventions (e.g. polite conversation)
A Quest for Identity

Alice is NOT Locke’s blank slate (tabula rasa); on the contrary, the child BECOMES a blank slate as she is forced to give up all that she had learnt at school.
Overview of chapters

- **Chapters 1-4: Introduction to Wonderland.** Language shown to be a crucial element in the demystification of normal (adult) order.

- **Chapters 5-7: Further into Wonderland and the investigation of language, meaning, and identity.**

- **Chapters 8.12: Arrival at the garden (parody of nostalgic Eden-childhood) and Alice’s rejection of disorder. Waking from the dream**
Overview of chapters: change

- Ch. 1: general disruption of order
- Ch. 2: body, measurement, maths
- Ch. 3: language
- Ch. 4: habitation
- Ch. 5: communication
- Ch. 6: social order
- Ch. 7: time
- Ch. 8: games
- Ch. 9: ethics and education
- Ch. 10: dance
- Ch. 11: justice
- Ch. 12: restoration of order
Parody of morality/educators/school knowledge

- Alice is confronted by grave travesties of the institutions which govern her and her author’s life - the monarchy, the rule of law, education, grammar, and social etiquette.

Latin and Greek = ‘Laughing and Grief’
Confutation of morality imparted to Victorian children

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “Un Amour d’Enfant” (Alice, Paris 1998) shows that Alice flouts the rules of behaviour girls were expected to observe:

* “A little girl doesn’t go out by herself”
* “A little girl doesn’t speak to strangers” (‘Agon’ vs ‘Irene’)
* “A little girl doesn’t take sweets from strangers”
* “A little girl shouldn’t play on Sunday”
* “Curiosity kills the cat”
Although Carroll questions and demystifies Victorian conventions, the book is not just about disorder.

There is ‘orderliness’ in demystification:

- Nonsense assumes an underlying stability of linguistic structures (e.g. hypercorrection)
- Alice: “Curiouser and curiouser!”
- Nonsense is versified (sound patterns and graphic units balance and compensate the loss of meaning)
Order & Disorder: The child

Alice undergoes a serious crisis of identity:
- she loses her size / name / character / school recollections

BUT

- she can stand up to the verbal attacks of the creatures of Wonderland

... and she ultimately rejects disorder