



Lewis Carroll: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

(1865)

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Genre: Novel, Young Adult. Country: England.

The story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* goes back to a boating trip on the river Isis on July 4, 1862. Lewis Carroll, together with his friend and colleague, the Reverend Robinson Duckworth (who was then a fellow of Trinity College in Oxford and later canon of Westminster), took the Liddell children, Lorina, the eldest daughter of the Dean of Christ Church College, Alice and Edith for a picnic. While rowing, he told them the adventures of Alice. On their return to the college, Alice asked Carroll to write down the story for her. He immediately sketched the outline and expanded it during a train journey to London the following day. Over the following two years he would work on the story and its illustrations. In November 1864, Alice Liddell received the completed and bound manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* as "A Christmas Gift to a Dear Child, in Memory of a Summer Day". This version was reprinted as a facsimile in 1886; a day after its publication, a theatrical version of *Alice* by Henry Savile Clarke opened at the Prince of Wales' Theatre in London (cf. Ash 17).

When Henry Kingsley, the brother of Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water Babies*, saw the manuscript while visiting the deanery, he suggested that the book ought to be published. In the meantime, Carroll had already sent it to his friend, the author George MacDonald, whose wife read it to the family. Their son Greville's reaction to the story of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* was "that there ought to be sixty thousand volumes of it" (*Lewis Carroll's Diaries* 4: 197n198). Consequently, Carroll added some chapters, among them "Pig and Pepper", "A Mad Tea Party" and the trial scene in the closing chapters, and persuaded John Tenniel, the cartoonist of *Punch*, to illustrate the book. He then wanted to find a new title, thinking that *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* might sound "like a lesson-book, in which instruction about mines would be administered", and suggested the following in a letter to his friend Tom Taylor (June 10, 1864):

Alice among the elves
Alice among the goblins
Alice's hour/ doings/ adventures in elf-land
Alice's hour/ doings/ adventures in wonderland.

Upon its first publication in the summer of 1865 as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the book was immediately withdrawn because of bad printing. Carroll recovered most of the presentation copies he had given to friends, and some of the bound copies and unbound sheets were finally sold to a company in New York and published as the first American edition in 1866. The reissue, now printed by a different firm, appeared shortly before Christmas in 1865.

A generic definition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* poses some problems: the narrative consists of twelve chapters that are loosely connected. This episodic structure reflects the fact that Alice's journey in wonderland takes place in a dream, which, however, is only uncovered at the end, when Alice awakes. Hence, Carroll wrote his most famous book in the tradition of the medieval dream narrative, e.g. William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and John Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The narrative is preceded by a poem that recalls the very boating trip during which the story was first told: "All in the golden afternoon / Full leisurely we glide" (7). After this rather sentimental recollection, the tale begins with Alice who "was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do" (11). When suddenly a white rabbit comes by and not only speaks but also wears a waist-coat and carries a watch, she follows him and falls "Down the Rabbit Hole", where she discovers a beautiful garden that can only be reached through a door that is too small for her.

While her pursuit of the rabbit was instigated by her curiosity, Alice has now found an aim: she wants to reach the garden. In line with the pattern of wish-fulfilment in fairy tales, she next discovers a bottle with the label "Drink Me". Alice shrinks after drinking the content of the bottle, but has forgotten the key to the door; upon her wish that she be tall again, she finds a cake that makes her grow. However, she grows so tall that she fills the whole hall and frightens the rabbit who returns there. Consequently, she feels lonely and starts to cry, which results in "The Pool of Tears" (heading of the second chapter) where she nearly drowns after she has become little again by means of the rabbit's gloves and fan. In the pool, she meets some Wonderland creatures, among them a Lory, an Eaglet, a Duck, and a Dodo, which are meant to represent Lorina, Edith, Duckworth and Dodgson himself (Lewis Carroll, i.e. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, suffered from a severe stammer and would pronounce his own name as Do-Do-Dodgson); the sisters reappear again during the course of the story, namely as Lacie, Elsie and Tillie in the Dormouse's tale (Lacie is an anagram of Alice, Elsie is L. C., Lorina Charlotte, and Tillie refers to Edith's family nickname Matilda; cf. Gardner, *The Annotated Alice* 80n11).

She swims with them to the bank, and the third chapter ("A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale") starts with their joint attempt to become dry again, which they achieve by a caucus-race ("they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked", 32) that ends on all being winners and Alice having to award them prizes. Alice, however, is left alone again after she has told the creatures, mainly birds and a mouse, of her cat Dinah.

The next creature she meets is again the Rabbit, who takes her for his housemaid and sends her away to fetch his fan and gloves. When Alice enters his house, she finds a bottle and, expecting that something will happen, drinks from it. Subsequently she grows tall again and fills the rabbit's house. It is only by means of pebbles which are thrown through the window and turn into little cakes she eats, that she becomes small again and is able to escape.

During her encounter with the Caterpillar in Chapter 5, she eventually obtains a means to control her size. The "Advice from a Caterpillar" consists in that she should eat from the mushroom he is sitting on: "One side will make you grow taller, and the other will make you grow shorter" (55). She now feels enabled to reach her aim, the garden. But before she gets there, she arrives at a little house where she meets the Duchess nursing a baby in a kitchen full of pepper and sees the Cheshire Cat for the first time (Chapter 6, "Pig and Pepper"). The Duchess eventually flings the baby at Alice, who leaves with it. The baby, however, turns into a pig shortly afterwards and runs away.

Immediately after that, Alice meets the Cheshire Cat who is sitting on a bough and grins, then fades and reappears, telling Alice of the madness of Wonderland: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad" (68). Alice very soon learns about the truth of this statement when she next bumps into the Dormouse, the March Hare and the Mad Hatter at "A Mad Tea Party". Like the Cheshire Cat, the Hare and Hatter originate in proverbs: "to grin like a Cheshire Cat", "Mad as a March Hare", and "Mad as a Hatter" (*ODEP*). It is at the end of the party,

during which she is asked a riddle without an answer, that she finds herself in the hall again: “Now, I’ll manage better this time” (81): she unlocks the door, eats from the mushroom and enters the garden.

Her expectations, however, are disappointed: it is not a paradisiacal garden but one marked by madness as well. First, she meets playing cards that paint white roses red because they planted the wrong colour. Then, the Queen of Hearts joins Alice and the gardeners and threatens them – and in the course of the chapter almost everybody else – with beheading.

Alice is subsequently invited to join the croquet game, during the course of which she discovers that everything is different from what she is used to. In “The Queen’s Croquet Ground”, she finds live mallets, namely flamingos, and as croquet balls live hedgehogs, which she both cannot manage. She complains to the Cheshire Cat, who appears and is then threatened with being beheaded as well — just that “you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from” (93): only its head is left while its body has already faded away.

The King leaves to fetch the Duchess, who is the cat’s owner, but when she arrives, the Cat has entirely disappeared. Alice now has to endure the mock-morals of Duchess, who all of a sudden leaves on being threatened by the Queen. After a short continuation of the croquet game, Alice is taken to the Mock Turtle and Gryphon by the Queen of Hearts to hear “The Mock Turtle’s Story” (Chapter 9). The tenth chapter also evolves around the melancholy mock turtle, the “Lobster-Quadrille” and the song that accompanies the dance. It ends on the call that “The trial’s beginning” (112) and on Alice’s being led away by the Gryphon.

The trial deals with the question “Who Stole the Tarts?” (Chapter 11) and is structured around the nursery rhyme “The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts” that more or less determines the action of this chapter (a pattern Carroll would adopt more widely in the sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass*). At the end of it, Alice is called as the next witness. Accidentally, she tips over the jury-box, having quite forgotten that she has started to grow again (without eating or drinking anything). When the trial becomes more and more nonsensical, Alice cannot stand it any longer:

“Who cares for *you*?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face. (129-30)

Alice finds herself where she started: she wakes up from her dream, tells her sister of her adventures and runs off to her tea. The narrative ends on her sister’s day-dream of Alice’s adventures and her picturing of Alice as an adult retelling her tale to other children.

Throughout the story, Alice is quite unsure of her identity because of her frequent changes of size: “Who in the world am I?” (22). In order to find out whether she has “been changed in the night” (22) she tries to recite poetry, “but it all [comes] [...] different” (51). Her attempts end in parodies of well-known poems for children, originally written by the likes of Isaac Watts, Robert Southey, or Jane Taylor: “How doth the little busy bee” is turned into “How doth the little crocodile”, “’Tis the voice of the Sluggard” becomes “’Tis the voice of the lobster”, “The Old Man’s Comforts” is converted into “You are old, Father William”, and “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” into “Twinkle, twinkle, little bat”. Alice, who in the prefatory poem asked for “nonsense”, now produces it herself. This nonsense is related to play: the animation of things and even of proverbs, as well as the parodies of popular poems, are all forms of play, as are Carroll’s language plays and his logic (cf. also his *Game of Logic*).

By the time of Carroll’s death in 1898, 180.000 copies of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* had been sold. The

story is a classic today, translated into more than sixty languages, and one of the most popular books ever written, besides Shakespeare and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. When in 2006 the British were to nominate their 'national icons', Alice ranked among the first twelve (other icons are Stonehenge, Punch & Judy, the FA Cup, the King James's Bible). Besides theatre versions of the story, there have been plenty of film productions of both *Alice*-books (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*), the first as early as 1906. The BBC broadcast a version by Jonathan Miller in 1966, starring Sir John Gielgud, Sir Michael Redgrave, Peter Sellers, and Anne-Marie Mallick as Alice.

Interpretations of the *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* include psychoanalytical, biographical and allegorical readings (see *Aspects of Alice*; Batey; Shane), yet it seems that, more than 140 years after its first publication, it is yet to be fully understood.

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