*What happens when Alice Falls down the Rabbit Hole?*

Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland & Children’s Role in Literature

However, we choose to define the paradigm of childhood, perhaps either as a social construct or an existential mode of being, there is something mysterious about it. The role of children, and what is expected of them by adults, differs drastically throughout cultures. Western culture, in particular, seems to have contradicting notions about the role of children and growing up; there is an emphasis on free play and remaining young and yet, there is often a certain pressure to grow up as well, creating tension in the adult-child dynamic. As childhood is often defined by the given culture, the way in which adults interact with children, and what they want from them, may change depending on where they are from.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland,* though classified as children’s literature, is actually quite complex and challenges some of the ways in which we see and understand childhood and the relationship between the childhood experience and the adult. I will be discussing some of the implications of this relationship in an attempt to analyze the function that children, especially children in literature, have for adults. I will be looking at Carroll’s Alice to help answer these questions as her character, while attempting to create her own identity, struggles to overcome the power asserted over her by adults in a fictive world created by a middle-aged man. Specifically, I intend to argue that adults utilize child characters as a means of reconnecting with their past by living vicariously through the child, as well as explore the meaning of childhood when represented in a literary form. I argue that adults recreate the childhood experience within literature in an attempt to address the nostalgia they feel and connect with a time that is otherwise impossible to return to. Children’s literature is a broad genre and interesting in that the works included are about children but nearly always written by adults. This genre allows for a space in which adults can return to childhood while also providing insight into the relationship that they have with children. Because ideas about childhood are so often instilled by culture, and many times there seems to be a sort of bewilderment regarding children, literature allows us to explore certain interactions between adults and children and the subsequent effect that relationship has on how adults view, and to an extent treat, children.

Alice’s dreamlike adventures through the nonsensical world of Wonderland begin with her fall down the rabbit hole as she follows the white rabbit with the watch in his waistcoat-pocket. Her experiences continue to grow more absurd as she consumes a vial of liquid labeled “DRINK ME” and a box of cakes labeled “EAT ME” which drastically alter her physical size and while she is only ten inches high she slips into a pool of the tears she had cried while she was quite large. She swims to shore where she meets a variety of odd creatures. The subsequent experiences Alice has are even more bizarre; she meets a caterpillar smoking a hookah atop a mushroom, a talking pigeon, a baby who turns into a piglet and a smiling Cheshire cat, all before the Mad Tea Party and croquet with the Queen. While with the Queen, Alice is taken to the trial of the Knave of Hearts, who has been accused of stealing the Queen’s tarts. As Alice demonstrates throughout her adventures, she is proper and reasonable, arguably even mature, and is appalled by the ridiculous proceedings and she begins to grow until she is “two miles high” (according to the king), and refusing to be intimidated by the illogical proceedings is expelled from Wonderland (87).

Alice’s adventures through the fictive world of Wonderland, beginning with her fall through the rabbit hole, and her interactions with the creatures there imply that there may be more to her journey than her struggle to create an identity. The reoccurring elements of childhood, adulthood and nostalgia fit under the theme of growing up and coming of age, which, when addressed in the world of *Wonderland*, also reveal some aspects of the relationship between the adult and child. Carroll’s own thoughts and anxieties come through the child-character he creates, beginning, perhaps, with Alice’s desire to fit through the small door she finds at the bottom of the rabbit hole; “Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole…how she longed to get out of that dark hall and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains…” (10). The “dark hall” of the adult world is contrasted with the “bright flowers” and “cool fountains” that appear in Wonderland, suggesting Carroll’s own desire to return to the nostalgic world of childhood.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Romantic writers and poets began to pursue their desire to reconnect with the “innocent” and “natural” world of childhood by imagining a self that was entirely separate from the “dark materiality and corruption of adult life” (Roth 23). With the rise of the golden age of children’s literature, writers such as Carroll attempted to reconnect with the distinctly separate world of childhood through their utilization of children as mediators between the spaces of childhood and adulthood. More specifically, however, was the writers’ utilization of *little girls* as intermediaries for middle-aged males’ relived childhood experiences because of the acquired association between childhood and femininity that was apparent during the Victorian era: “[the] gender ideology of the Victorian middle class, the position of sexually undifferentiated childhood was implicitly female…” (Spear 649). Carroll in particular, stuck to that identity and projected it onto idealized girls, specifically Alice, who is the perfect embodiment of a Victorian middle class child: prim, proper and polite. This association between femininity and childhood is reflected in Christina Roth’s article “Looking through the Spyglass” where she claims that “[b]ecause the first six years of male life in the nineteenth century carried a ‘clear stamp of femininity, especially in retrospect,’ little girls provided the logical intermediary for relived childhood experiences for adult men…” (Roth 24). This coalescing of femininity and childhood is found within characters like Alice, who struggle to create and establish an identity that is entirely their own: “this move comes in part, from adult men’s consideration of their own childhoods as specifically feminine, making the physical body of a girl herself in to a nostalgic space” (Roth 24). Subsequently, little girls in Victorian literature existed within a “sanctified space” of childhood not so much for their own purpose or pleasure, but rather as a service to adults, specifically, adult men.

Thus, as children began to symbolize nostalgic spaces that were suspended between the past and present, children’s literature became a place for that to occur. Like Niklas Salmose, in his essay “A Past that has never been present: The literary Experience of Childhood and Nostalgia,” I suggest that the literary childhood experience is best defined as an interior consciousness, “inflamed by sensations, perceptions and embodiments” (36). But, unlike Salmose who claims that these “stimulate true childhood experience and memory,” I believe that often the literary childhood experiences are not so much representations of true occurrences but rather fantasies suspended in time, where the adult author can enter. In particular, these fantasies are used as a means of handling the adults nostalgic longing to return to an entity separate from the distinguished world of the adult. Salmose states that “[n]ostalgia evoked through the use of a childhood is generally achieved by addressing the world of childhood as an alternative to the present. This is done either through the use of an idealized space or time” (333). This is exactly what Carroll does in *Alice in Wonderland*, where Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole and her drastic shifts in physical size in order to fit through the small tunnel to Wonderland establish the return to childhood as something completely separate from adulthood. It is also interesting to note how Alice’s travel to the distant world of Wonderland is almost symbolic of a conflation of space and time. That is, the traveling to somewhere far away, like down the rabbit hole and through the small door into Wonderland, is paralleled with the idea that the author is also returning to somewhere far away. In this instance, however, Carroll is returning to a far-away time, i.e., childhood.

I have proposed that Carroll utilizes Alice as a way to return to the sequestered world of childhood both because of the Victorian association between femininity and childhood and the conflation of time and space as a means for transporting the author. Salmose states that “[n]ostalgia evoked through the use of childhood is generally achieved by addressing the world of childhood as an alternative to the present. This is done either through the use of an idealized space or time” (333). The story of Alice begins with her fall down the rabbit hole, symbolic, perhaps, of Carroll’s attempt to reconnect with the childhood that he is otherwise isolated from and designating Wonderland as the idealized space that is alternative to Carroll’s present. Furthermore, “the deeply profound symbolism of water, sea and especially waves has attracted human thought for ages through their associations with both the repetitiveness and passing of time” (Salmose 337). After Alice falls down the rabbit hole she is carried away in a pool of her own tears, having shrunk to a mere ten inches: “…[S]plash! she was up to her chin in salt-water. Her first idea was that she had fallen into the sea…however, she soon made out that she was in a pool of the tears which she had wept when she was nine feet high…” (Carroll 17). The tears that Alice finds herself swimming in carry her farther into Wonderland, subsequently demonstrating Carroll’s need to return to childhood and providing the space in which he can return to a nostalgic past.

I would define a literary childhood experience as having an interior consciousness, that is one inflamed by sensations and embodiments meant to stimulate a true childhood experience. However, Carroll only does this to an extent as his conscious comes through Alice’s character by way of utilizing her as a conduit to the past, arresting Alice in a childhood she may not naturally be in: “Carroll… perform[s] a kind of erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of an adult imagination and for the pursuit of adult desires within such a fantasy space; however, the adult presence comes through the child’s perspective and experience, passively commenting on what the child sees and feels” (Roth 24). Thus, Carroll unsuccessfully creates a consciousness separate from his own and in doing so he creates a tension between the adult and child that is apparent throughout the book. Despite her curiosity, Alice generally acts as though she is a well-ordered adult and she struggles to deal with the contradicting notion of being forced into a childhood experience that is not entirely her own.

Alice constantly responds to the childish world around her with logic and manners, furthering the idea that Carroll is forcing her into a childhood that is not natural. Even when she is first falling down the rabbit hole into Wonderland Alice is alarmingly rational: there is a bottle labeled “DRINK ME…” at the bottom but “the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. ‘No, I’ll look first,’ she said, ‘and see whether it’s marked *poison”* (11). While this may seem unimportant at first, it is one of the first instances where the tension created by Carroll writing from the perspective of a young child seeps through. This tension is further demonstrated when Alice, having tired herself out while attempting to reach the key to the small door to begins to cry: “’Come, there’s no use in crying like that!’ Said Alice to herself rather sharply…She generally gave herself very good advice” (12). Thus, this begins to confirm and perhaps exemplify the Roth’s claim that the adult presence comes through the child’s perspective and this creates a dynamic within Alice which is not entirely that of a child, but rather contains the anxieties of Carroll as well. Do I mention PIG here?

Moreover, in her instrumental study *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s fiction*, Jacqueline Rose “defines children’s literature as an aggressive act of colonization in which the adult author manipulates the child into identifying with an image of childhood that satisfies the adult’s own needs and desires” (Roth 25).” Thus, as Alice continues to embody the awkward position of being a child with an adult’s consciousness she personifies a telescopic link between the adults outside of Wonderland and the child within. When she first begins to shrink she observes “[she] must be shutting up like a telescope” (11). Only a small time later, having eaten cake that causes her to grow extraordinarily fast, she exclaims: “Now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was!” (13). When she meets the hookah-smoking Caterpillar sitting atop a mushroom he tells her that one side of the mushroom will make her shrink and the other will make her grow, thereby providing her with a means of controlling her size. After nibbling at the “right-handed bit” she “found that her shoulders were nowhere to be found: all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her” (41). This noticeably changes her perspective of Wonderland and furthers the notion that Alice’s attempts to create an identity are inhibited by Carroll’s use of her as a conduit for nostalgic travel.

Alice’s continuous changes to her physical size are paralleled with her struggle to create an identity that is entirely her own. In “Power Struggle between the Adult and Child in *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland”* Aihong Ren, states that “Alice’s change of her body size can be understood as a wish-fulfillment of the child to be free from the control of the adult” (1161). However, I would argue that it could also be understood as a means for Carroll to avoid confrontation with his adult life and thus to shift the power away from Alice as she cannot maintain a confidence in her size and subsequently cannot establish an autonomous identity. While Ren claims that Carroll “instead of exploiting children’s books as a means to transmit ideology to children and repress them…recognizes the child’s value and defends the child’s right’s for power,” I contend that the rather opposite is true; Carroll disallows Alice to have complete control and consequently dominates her being. In fact, when Alice does assert some degree of power during the Trial of the Knave she is expelled from Wonderland, having *grown* too large:

“’No, no!’” said the Queen. “’Sentence first—verdict afterwards.’ ‘Stuff and nonsense!’ Said Alice loudly. ‘The idea of having the sentence first!’ ‘Hold your tongue!’ Said the Queen, turning purple. ‘I wo’n’t!’ Said Alice. ‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted…’Who cares for *you*?’ said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). ‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’” (95).

Though many of the creatures Alice encounters attempt to infantilize her in some way, they are themselves childlike. Thus, when Carroll can no longer maintain the desired distance from the child, and when she begins to resist the childhood Carroll has arrested her in, he removes her from Wonderland, subsequently removing himself from his nostalgic return to childhood and maintaining the space as a fantasy.

One of the ideas Alice resists most vehemently throughout the novel is the notion that she should remain a child forever. James Kincaid, in his essay “The Wonder child in Neverland” points to the idea that Alice often turns for reassurance to poems like “You are old, Father William,” Carroll’s remake of the poem “The Old Man’s Comforts” and the kind adults often force upon children: “trying to recover a sense of who she *is*, Alice runs for answers to the worst part of her culture. It is very sad and irksome, what with all the Wonderland creatures singing to her and waving brightly colored…banners telling her not to worry about the sort of identity that grown-ups give you” (332). Alice recites the poem at the request of the Caterpillar, in response to her confusion regarding who she is. It features an old man bragging about how he spent his entire youth preparing for his old age and thus, as a result of hoarding his youth is now “cheerful” (Carroll 35). This further illustrates the contradictory dynamic resulting from Alice’s struggle to create her own identity while Carroll forces her into a childhood where she is not naturally inclined to be.

I have stated that Carroll utilizes Alice as a means to return to the distinctly separate world of childhood in an attempt to address his nostalgia and escape the world of the Victorian adult. In “Reciprocal Aggression,” Marah Gubar asserts that “Carroll’s decision to represent Alice as immersed in discourse not of her own making and his habit of dwelling on his heroine’s artificiality – her status as a figment of someone else’s imagination – are closely related” (340). The subsequent implications of this are demonstrated throughout the story, as Alice is unable to maintain a steady size, and periodically asks the question: “who am I?” She is consistently confused by her bodily changes and the pressure to remain youthful, indicating that she is not an autonomous being but rather a figment of Carroll’s imagination in a world he dictates. Gubar further states that “although Carroll flirts with the idea that children can wrest away the pen, he does not really take it seriously as a genuine possibility. It is grown-ups who control the world of children’s fiction…” (341). Thus, by neglecting to give Alice power, and by controlling her creation and many of her thoughts, Carroll controls the fantasy world he creates and provides himself with a conduit to the nostalgic past of childhood he desires to return.

The physical absence of adults in Wonderland, that is the absence of adults who are not the fictive creatures Carroll presents, and who are not able to control the child, does not imply the absence of the adult influence exuded by Carroll. The employment of the child narrator allows the adult author to obscure their presence, enabling Carroll to enter the world of childhood with his use of authoritative didactic manipulation. His utilization of a little girl as an intermediary coincides with the Victorian association between femininity and childhood and, along with his creation of Wonderland and continuous control over Alice’s adventures there, lend to the notion that he is connecting with a world separate from his own.

-Association between femininity and childhood; further takes power away