Alice is widely regarded as a work of genius, with complex layers of meaning beneath the "nonsense", but this does not mean the author had a hidden agenda or ulterior motive when writing the stories. Carroll was fully aware that the surreal and cryptic qualities of his work would invite endless interpretation, and of the tendency for readers to project their own views onto a text: "Words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer means. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I'm glad to accept as the meaning of the book." (From a letter, referring to *The Hunting of the Snark*) Furthermore, the question of "meaning" is repeatedly addressed throughout the stories, by characters including the Duchess ("Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves"), the Red Queen ("What do you suppose is the use of child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning"), Humpty Dumpty ("When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less") and Alice herself ("Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas -- only I don't exactly know what they are!"). All over the world, people continue to seek an explanation for the stories, a deeper understanding or higher level of meaning, but I believe this to be a pointless exercise. In the end, *Alice* was created for children, and it requires no great intellect to fully understand and enjoy her adventures. The following paragraphs discuss some of the more widespread myths and theories applied to the *Alice* books. (Note: This information is not definitive; I am not an expert and my research on Carroll is by no means exhaustive.)

In recent years, *Alice* has become closely associated with the Goth subculture. This is understandable given its Victorian roots and ethereal qualities; however, the extent of this cultural attachment has led to wide misconception regarding the original work. Put simply, the *Alice* books are not a true example of Gothic fiction and do not contain deeply macabre undertones. That is not to say there are no similarities to the genre, and legitimate parallels have been drawn to gothic works such as those by Edgar Allen Poe, but the *Alice* stories were invented with the sole intention of delighting children, and not disturbing them. This is a highly significant fact and quite possibly the main reason for the books' success; at the time, children's literature was primarily concerned with instilling morality, generally through fear. *Alice* broke this trend, presenting a story that was wholesome and moral, but entertaining instead of intimidating. Unquestionably there are elements that could viably be read as dark or sinister ("Off with her head!"), but their light-hearted, whimsical and incredibly humorous context should be considered before interpreting in this way. After all, it was a "wonderful dream", not a terrible nightmare.

Today, the *Alice* books are popularly believed to be an allusion to (or the result of) substance abuse, particularly hallucinogenic drugs. This theory emerged in the1960s with the birth of the hippie subculture, and is applied almost exclusively to *Wonderland* and not *Looking Glass*. It is easy to see how the story could be construed in this way and to recognise the alleged "drug references"; Alice's experience is a dream (sometimes defined as a kind of hallucination), and the image of a tobacco-smoking caterpillar sitting atop a mushroom of all things is highly connotative of drug use. However, to assert that this is the intended meaning, or hidden message, of the entire story is quite preposterous. Since the explosion of recreational drug use in the 1960s, there has remained abroad degree of scepticism regarding the ability to be naturally imaginative, to dream up surreal fantasies without substance inducement. Many people now struggle to comprehend the scope of Carroll's inventiveness and eagerly accept drug abuse as a simple and logical explanation. In fact, Carroll/Dodgson was very unlikely to have experimented with substances; scholars and biographers have gleaned from his diaries and other writings that he abhorred smoking ("the harmless but unnecessary weed"). Furthermore, Dodgson's innate wit and creativity were apparent from a young age. To amuse his ten brothers and sisters, he wrote many limericks, parodies and humorous stories for the illustrated family editions, *The Rectory Magazine* and later *The Rectory Umbrella*. These early works display the same ingeniousness and penchant for nonsense so prevalent and beloved in the

Alice books, indicating no necessity for hallucinogenic assistance later in life. It is indeed possible that the sullen, "languid" caterpillar may have been an observation on drug use, but the books are by no means an endorsement of this behaviour.

By far the most serious area of controversy surrounding the *Alice* stories is the idea that the author's fondness for little girls was sexually motivated. This has become an extremely complicated subject over the years, as a result of many dubious and skewed biographies, but as we can never be certain of a person's private thoughts or feelings, it is quite impossible to either prove or disprove. However, the factual evidence (in the form of Carroll/Dodgson's own writings, as well as descriptions and recollections by acquaintances) indicates that his relationships with children were nothing other than straightforward friendships. The dynamic of these friendships may seem odd, but even the briefest overview of Dodgson's life story provides a very reasonable explanation. Dodgson was never happier than during his own childhood, at home with his parents and ten siblings, and he longed for this simple, unadulterated existence for the rest of his life. A nervous man, he struggled with a speech impediment, but found a sense of confidence when speaking to children, concocting fanciful stories and other amusements. The innocence of youth was something he seemed to consider immensely precious and sacred, so it is highly unlikely he would wish to damage or violate it in any way. It has been implied that Dodgson fell victim to this himself, in that the bullying he was subjected to at boarding school may have been of a sexual nature. The conjecture and concern is greatly fuelled by the fact that Dodgson, also an acclaimed photographer, had a preference for creating nude portraits of young girls. He considered "their *perfect* simplicity" to be "very beautiful", an expression that today seems sordid or unsavoury. However, this was not abnormal practice at the time; children were commonly depicted as such in Victorian works of art, particularly represented as angels or other spiritual beings (possibly attributable to the high child mortality rate). Carroll/Dodgson biographers have determined that the children depicted in his photographs were always accompanied in the studio by a parent or governess. Whatever thoughts or feelings Dodgson may or may not have harboured, there is no evidence to suggest that he behaved in an abusive, predatory or perverted manner; a devotedly religious man, he took a vow of celibacy on being ordained. His many "child friends" (many of whom were, in fact, not children at all) remembered him only as akind gentleman and true friend. Certainly, readers of *Alice* can rest assured that the books themselves contain no indecent references or attitudes towards children.

Like most classic works of literature, the historical context of the *Alice* books is of keen interest to present-day readers, certainly those of other cultures. *Alice* is often studied as a parodic perspective on Victorian Britain, at least the lifestyle of the middle and upper classes. This is an entirely reasonable way to read the text, as Carroll was an intelligent, discerning author, and the books' humour is largely observational. Carroll/Dodgson was both interested and involved in Oxford politics, having written various pamphlets and letters on the subject. Historians have drawn various conclusions from *Alice* regarding his views on Victorian society, including concerns about the education system and the treatment of the working class, while other scholars have described him as a snob, who neither associated with the lower class nor truly sympathised with their situation. It cannot be denied that, considering his position as a Reverend, Carroll's work reflects surprisingly little attention towards the most significant problems of the time. Alice is commonly hailed as an embodiment of the quintessential Victorian child, when in fact she is merely an example of the fortunate minority; Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, published 27 years before *Alice*, provides a much more accurate representation of the average Victorian child, for whom survival was a constant struggle on the streets or in workhouses. Of course, Dickens's work was not aimed at children and was of a much more serious nature, so the two are not directly comparable. One issue Carroll does seem inclined to challenge in *Alice* is the typical middle/upper class attitude that children should be seen

and not heard; despite her lack of worldly knowledge, Alice possesses a great deal of common sense and will not conform to rules she finds nonsensical. Tenniel's illustrations are largely attributable for the books' seemingly political appearance; familiar at the time as the chief cartoonist for the liberal *Punch* magazine, he rendered Alice's adventures in the same, highly detailed style. The theory goes awry, however, when it is proposed that Carroll's primary objective in writing the stories was to make a political statement. Of course a writer's values and opinions influence their work and can be deciphered by a perceptive reader, but realistically, if a person intends to issue a social commentary, a story told on a river picnic, written down as a gift for an individual child and then incidentally published, would not be an efficient vehicle for doing so.

The Hatter has recently become the subject of increasing interest and is now popularly acknowledged as the stories' main character after Alice herself. With his iconic top hat, the appeal is somewhat understandable, but the idea that he has some kind of special significance or back-story is completely unfounded. The Hatter did not appear in the original story, *Alice's Adventures Underground*, and was added, along with the Cheshire Cat, as part of the book's expansion before its publication. Even in *Wonderland*, he does not play a major role; he is not the host of the famous tea party scene, which takes place in the March Hare's garden, and Alice does not display a great deal of fondness towards him or his companions. It seems very unlikely she would have felt inclined to follow the strange old man to Wonderland, had he been the one to run past on the riverbank. The character's considerable following appears to have been spawned from the Mad Hatter's interactive presence at the Disney theme parks, where he has proved a big hit with the guests and inspired much fan artwork online. Some have even suggested a romantic relationship between the Hatter and Alice, which has to be the most ridiculous thing I have heard concerning the stories; Alice is seven years old after all.

With its bizarre imagery and pensive tone, *Alice* is a Freudian psychoanalyst's dream, but while the stories have been dissected in this way many times, these studies have largely failed to convince in their assertions of sexual symbolism. Nonetheless, the books do provide some degree of insight into Carroll's psyche. Many people believe that the character of Alice is in fact Alice Liddell, the young girl to whom Dodgson originally told and dedicated the story, but this is not exactly true. The character was indeed inspired by Liddell, but is not an authentic representation of her; the many thoughts, values and emotions described in the narrative are strictly those of the author (though he quite possibly recognised these same qualities in Liddell). Carroll expressed himself through the character of Alice and imposed his own personality upon her, particularly an inquisitive nature and bemusement at the peculiar ways of adult society. Much of Carroll's work is undisguised in its yearning for, or attempt to recapture, his own happy childhood; and this is especially true of the *Alice* stories. The closing paragraph of *Wonderland* describes a wish for Alice to "keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood ... gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: ... feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days". This same sentiment was voiced nine years earlier in a poem called *Solitude*, the first written under the name of Lewis Carroll:
"I'd give all wealth that years have piled, the slow result of Life's decay, to be once more a little child for one bright summer-day."
The poetry that bookends *Looking Glass*, written a few years later, is of a much more sorrowful tone, alluding to winter and death:
"And though the shadow of a sigh May tremble through the story, for 'happy summer days' gone by, and vanished summer glory" "Long had paled that sunny sky: Echoes fade and memories die. Autumn frosts have slain July."

Similar imagery in the story, such as the scented rushes fading in Alice's hands, suggests a resignation to the brevity of youth. It is possible that seeing Liddell grows up and leaves behind childish ways reinforced feelings of loss for Carroll's own "happy summer days".

"No story in English literature has intrigued me more than Lewis Carroll's ***Alice in Wonderland***. It fascinated me the first time I read it as a schoolboy, and as soon as I possibly could, after I started making animated cartoons, I acquired the film rights to it." - **Walt Disney** "Pure hysteria is what makes famous fairy tales. That's why ***Alice in Wonderland*** has been so popular for more thana century. From what I understand, it is the third largest best-seller in the history of publishing, behind only the Bible and the works of Shakespeare." - **Irwin Allen, film producer and director** "Only Lewis Carroll has shown us the world upside down as a child sees it, and has made us laugh as children laugh." - **Virginia Woolf, writer** "There are things in ***Alice*** that would give Freud the creeps." - **William Empson, literary critic and poet** "***Alice in Wonderland*** is, in effect, two books: a book for children and a book for adults... I know that adults often wonder why and how Alice can appeal to children. I suspect that children wonder why adults like it... Most adults, most successful adults, most happy adults, never really or quite stop being children." - **Warren Weaver, scientist**