

Abandonment/Loneliness

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland provides an inexhaustible mine of literary, philosophical, and scientific themes. Here are some general themes which the reader may find interesting and of some use in studying the work.

Alice's initial reaction after falling down the rabbit-hole is one of extreme loneliness. Her curiosity has led her into a kind of Never-Never Land, over the edge of Reality and into a lonely, very alien world. She is further lost when she cannot establish her identity. Physically, she is lost; psychologically, she also feels lost. She cannot get her recitations right, and she becomes even more confused when her arithmetic (a subject she believed to be unchanging and solid) fails her. Every attempt to establish a familiar basis of identity creates only the sense of being lost — absolutely lost. Alice becomes, to the reader, a mistreated, misunderstood, wandering waif. Trapped in solitude, she finds herself lapsing into soliloquies that reflect a divided, confused, and desperate self.

The Child-Swain

Alice is the most responsible "character" in the story; in fact, she is the only real person and the only "true" character. At most, the other creatures are antagonists, either a bit genial or cruel, depending on how they treat Alice at any given point in the story. Alice's innocence makes her a perfect vehicle of social criticism à la *Candide*. In her encounters, we see the charmingly pathetic ingénue — a child whose only purpose is to escape the afflictions around her. By implication, there is the view that a child's perception of the world is the only sane one. Conversely, to grow and mature leads to inevitable corruption, to sexuality, emotionalism, and adult hypocrisy. The child as an innocent, sympathetic object has obvious satirical utility, but only to the point that the child must extend sympathy herself — and Alice fails to do this when she describes her cat Dinah to the Mouse, and later when she confesses to having eaten eggs to the frightened mother pigeon.

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).

Death

Growing up in Wonderland means the death of the child, and although Alice certainly remains a child through her physical changes in size — in other ways, death never seems to be far away in Wonderland. For example, death is symbolized by the White Rabbit's fan which causes Alice to *almost* vanish; death is implied in the discussion of the Caterpillar's metamorphosis. And death permeates the morbid atmosphere of the "enchanted garden." The Queen of Hearts seems to be the Goddess of Death, always yelling her single, barbarous, indiscriminate, "Off with their heads!"

Nonsense

One of the key characteristics of Carroll's story is his use of language. Much of the "nonsense" in *Alice* has to do with transpositions, either of mathematical scale (as in the scene where Alice multiplies incorrectly) or in the scrambled verse parodies (for example, the Father William poem). Much of the nonsense effect is also achieved by directing conversation to parts of speech rather than to the meaning of the speakers — to definitions rather than to indications. When Alice asks the Cheshire-Cat which way to go, he replies that she should, first, know where she's going. The Frog-Footman tells her not to knock on the door outside the Duchess' house; he can only open the door when he is inside (though Alice, of course, manages to open the door from the outside). And some of the nonsense in Wonderland is merely satirical, such as the Mock Turtle's education. But the nature of nonsense is much like chance, and rules to decipher it into logical meaning or sense patterns work against the principal intent of Carroll's purpose — that is, he wanted his nonsense to be random, senseless, unpredictable, and without rules.

Nature and Nurture

The structure of a dream does not lend itself to resolution. A dream simply is a very different kind of "experience." In this sense, Alice does not really evolve into a higher understanding of her adventure. She has the *memory* of Wonderland but she brings nothing "real" from Wonderland — only her memory of it. This is a powerful testament to the influence of her domestication. In Alice's case, good social breeding is more important than her natural disposition. But if Alice leaves Wonderland without acquiring any lasting, truly worthwhile knowledge, neither can she give any wisdom to the creatures whom she has met there. Nature, in each case, sets limits on the ability to assimilate experiences.

In the Caucus-race, for instance, the race depicts the absurdity of democracy. Yet, Alice's critical attitude — a product of her class education — is also satirized.

The object of the race is to have everyone dry off; so it doesn't matter *who* wins or loses, and clearly the outcome of the race is irrelevant. To think otherwise, as Alice does, is absurd. The point of the running about is to dry off, which, incidentally, makes it equally absurd to call moving about for that purpose a "race."

Wonderland offers a peculiar view of Nature. For one thing, all the animals have obviously been educated. There is literally not a "stupid" one in the bunch (unless it is the puppy or the pig/baby). In general, the basic condition common to all the creatures is not ignorance — but madness, for which there seems to be no appropriate remedy. A Victorian reader must have wondered how the animals were "trained"; after all, the assumptions that Alice makes all rest on her "training." On this point, however, the reader can only speculate.

In Wonderland, much of the fun depends on the confusion of "training." Nature and natural feelings seem to more often than not mean danger or potential violence. (But except for the puppy and the pig/baby, there are no natural creatures, however much natural feelings are expressed.) The Duchess, for example, seems to be only the epitome of rage; she conveys a kind of sadistic delight in digging her chin into Alice's shoulder; anger even seems to motivate her didactic morals (that is, "Flamingoes and mustard both bite").

Finally, nature seems superior to nurture in Wonderland, as the personification of beasts seems to be no improvement on the actual beasts themselves. The pig, for example, is a more content creature as a *pig*, for the baby was not happier when it was a *baby*.

Justice

Although there are plenty of "rules," the laws of Wonderland seem a parody of real justice. The Queen of Hearts, for example, thinks nothing of violating the law which protects people from illegal prosecution; she seeks the head of the Knave of Hearts for having been only *accused* of stealing the tarts. Thus, the Queen violates the spirit of the law against stealing to satisfy the logical necessity that every trial must have an execution. The spirit of the law is, so to speak, sacrificed to satisfy the reversibility of the symbolic letter of her logic. In the croquet game, anyone can be executed for reasons known *only* to the sovereign Queen, who acts as though she is a divinity with the power to take or give life. Under a monarchy, the monarchs are above the law. In Wonderland, however, the monarch's will is flaunted when the command is to execute someone. Ignoring the Queen's command to behead someone is a matter of survival as well as justice.

The trial of the Knave of Hearts satirizes both too much law and law by personal edict. Someone may have stolen the tarts, and it may well have been the Knave. But the offense is trivial, and the sentence is only a joke. One of the problems with the law in any context is its application. When the law ceases to promote harmony, then its purpose as a regulator of human

affairs is subverted. In Wonderland the idea of a law seems ridiculous because the *operative principle* of Wonderland is *chaos*. Injustice, then, is a logical consequence of living in Wonderland. The rule of the strongest person must be the law — that is, the law of anarchy. The trial of the Knave is proof of this woeful state of affairs. Fortunately, Alice is the strongest of the lot, and she overthrows the cruel Queen's sentence of execution and the savage kangaroo court. There is no way to change the law because no "law" exists. By her rebellion, Alice serves both the cause of sanity and justice.

Time and Space

Time, in the sense of duration, exists in Wonderland only in a psychological and artistic sense. When we ordinarily conceive of time, we think of units of duration — that is, hours, minutes, and seconds; or days, weeks, months, and years. We may also think of getting older and having lived from a certain date. We assume that the time reflected on a clock and our age are essentially the same kind of process. But a clock may repeat its measure of duration, whereas we have only *one* lifetime. Our age is therefore a function of an irreversible psychological sense of duration. We live in the conscious knowledge that we can never return to a given point in the past, as we might adjust a clock for daylight savings time. Our personal, psychological time is absolute and irreversible. And that is the kind of time that creatures like the Mad Hatter employ in Wonderland. (We never know whether the White Rabbit uses a mechanistic time, only that he has a watch.)

When Alice looks at the Mad Hatter's watch, she sees a date, but she sees neither hours nor minutes. Because Time and the Mad Hatter do not get along, Time has "frozen" the tea-party at six o'clock. But it turns out that time is also reversed so that a year has the duration of an hour and vice versa. Reckoned in hour-lengths, the tea-party must go on for at least a year (unless Time and the Mad Hatter make up their quarrel). But because of psychological time, the creatures are able to leave and return to the tea-party. And because of psychological time, Wonderland's experience comes to an end, and just as our uniquely, individual lives will one day end, so will our nightmares and dreams.