Alice in Wonderland

Info

Author: Lewis Carroll

Genre: Fantasy, Literary nonsense

Publication date: November 1865

What It's About

Lewis Carroll's tale Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a carnival mirror reflection of Victorian society with its rigid social conventions. While today's social norms are undoubtedly different from those of Carroll's time, the story's underlying challenge still resonates: a child must navigate an unfamiliar world full of arbitrary and ridiculous adult rules, where fear is often the driving force for many participants' decisions. The answers to riddles are questionable or non-existent. Rote learning offers no guides, tales lack morals. Alice's good sense and her feeling for justice are indispensable to her success. Through her fantastical adventures, Alice challenges the idea that children should adapt to the adult world with its questionable principles and morality. She finds herself in an imperfect world that can be terrifying, yet her naive but sound judgment helps her survive and unveil the egotism, angst and violence surrounding her. Carroll's satire of the era, hidden behind fabled creatures absorbed in absurd activities, was so poignant that Queen Victoria herself became Alice's most eminent fan.

Take-Aways

- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is one of the most successful children's books of all times.
- Alice goes down a rabbit hole to find the mysterious underground Wonderland. She encounters fabulous creatures that defy all reasonable expectations. After numerous incoherent adventures involving a Hatter, a Hare and the Queen of Hearts, she wakes up in time for tea.
- Published in 1865, the book lampoons the moralistic and hypocritical Victorian era.
- Alice, a child, discovers the nonsensical and nightmarish world of adults.
- Her painful growing and shrinking experiences are a symbol of puberty and the confusing search for a new identity.
- The author Lewis Carroll first told the story to the ten-year-old Alice Liddell, his colleague's daughter.
- The story's absurd nature, hilarious puns and verbal soundscape make it an outstanding example of the nonsense literature that was so popular in mid-19th century England.
- The French Surrealists later saw Carroll's style as an expression of the freed subconscious mind.
- The trivialized 1951 Disney adaptation continues to shape most people's misleading impression of an ideal and harmonious Wonderland to this day.
- "'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice. 'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'"

Summary

Following the White Rabbit

On a beautiful summer's day, Alice sits with her sister at the riverbank. Alice is starting to feel bored, finding no pictures or conversations in her sister's book when, suddenly, a white rabbit with red eyes runs by. Excitedly, the little animal pulls a pocket watch out of his waistcoat and murmurs to himself that he's going to be late. Full of curiosity, Alice jumps to her feet. She has never seen a rabbit with a watch, let alone one wearing clothes.

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“The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped
suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping
herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well.”
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Alice chases after him until he disappears into a rabbit hole. She crams herself into the narrow hole, only to find herself falling down a deep well. The fall seems to take an eternity. She can only imagine that she'll soon arrive at the other end of the earth, where, in her view, people walk with their heads pointed downward. Finally, she lands in a long hall cluttered with small doors. A golden key lies on a glass table. It fits one of the doors leading to a passage, at the end of which Alice sees an enchanting garden. Alas, Alice is too tall to pass through the door.

Either Too Big or Too Small

She sees a little bottle labeled “Drink me.” Suspiciously, after carefully checking that it isn't labeled as poison, she tastes its contents and, finding its taste very nice, drinks it to the last drop. She suddenly shrinks. Now, Alice is too short to reach the key lying on the table. She begins to cry. She spots a cake labeled “Eat me” under the table. Without further ado, she bites into it and grows so much she can barely fit inside the hall. Again, she's too tall to pass through the door into the garden. Alice is bitterly disappointed and cries so much that a pool of tears forms around her. She doesn't know who she is any more.

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“But if I’m not the same, the next question is, ‘Who in the world am I?’” (Alice)
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The Rabbit shows up again, but when Alice addresses him, he scurries away in fear, leaving only a pair of white gloves behind. Alice wonders what has happened to her. To find out whether she is, in fact, still Alice, she sings a few nursery rhymes – convinced that she knows them by heart – only to realize that the words are coming out all wrong.

A Tearful Bath

Alice manages to put on one of the Rabbit's little gloves. Apparently, she has grown smaller yet again. Quickly, she wants to seize the moment and run for the entry to the garden – only to find herself in the middle of the pool of her own tears. She starts to swim. Looking around she realizes that many animals have fallen into the water and are swimming behind her. As she attempts to make conversation with the Mouse, she repeatedly insults it by talking about her cat and its hunting, in particular, mice.

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“Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, ‘I am older than you, and must know better’; and this Alice would not allow, without knowing how old it was, and, as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said.”
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After Alice and the animals climb on shore, they wonder how they can get dry. The Mouse attempts to dry them with the driest thing he knows: a dull narrative of the Norman Conquest. When this is unsuccessful, the Dodo suggests a Caucus race in which everyone runs where they please to no clear purpose. After having run around in all directions for at least half an hour, drying off properly in the process, they wonder who has won the race, and decide that they’ve all won and everyone should get a prize. They ask Alice to hand out prizes. Luckily, she finds some old candy in her pocket, and she has just enough for each animal to get a piece. When she doesn’t have any left for herself, the animals agree she must still have a prize. The Dodo asks what else she has in her pockets. She checks and finds a single thimble. He promptly takes it from her and hands it back again, asking her with a short speech to accept the gift. Alice, despite finding the spectacle absurd, solemnly takes the gift.

Alice Shall Burn

A little later the Rabbit returns, demanding that she give back his gloves at once. Having lost the gloves, Alice decides to search for them. While looking for the gloves, she comes upon a little house and steps in. Driven by curiosity, she takes a sip from yet another bottle and suddenly grows so big that her arms stick out of the house and one leg goes up the chimney. The Rabbit decides to send Bill the Lizard through the chimney to fetch his gloves. Alice hears Bill scrambling above her and, with a sharp kick, sends the lizard flying the other way like a rocket. This infuriates the Rabbit so much that he decides to burn down the house. Alice threatens to send her cat Dinah – who is at home with her parents – after the Rabbit, but to no avail.

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“‘We must burn the house down!’ said the Rabbit’s voice, and Alice called out as loud as she could, ‘If you do, I’ll set Dinah at you!’”
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The Rabbit throws pebbles at her that turn into cakes, and after eating one of them she begins shrinking again. Now she can free herself and flee into the woods. She finds herself too small yet again, and comes upon the Caterpillar, who is sitting on a mushroom, smoking a long hookah.

A Mushroom for Growing and Shrinking

The Caterpillar asks Alice who she is, and when the girl responds that with all her growing and shrinking she hardly knows any more, he demands an explanation. Alice feels unable to give one, but she can’t help but comment that the Caterpillar, of all creatures, has no reason to criticize her. After all it’ll also change its appearance when it becomes a butterfly. Aggrieved by her clever answer, the Caterpillar suggests that Alice recite a poem. After she has finished, the crawler tells her coolly that she didn’t say it right. Still, Alice confides in the creature that she’d like to be a different size, and the Caterpillar becomes a bit more pleasant, revealing that Alice should eat from one side of its mushroom to grow and the other to shrink.

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“‘How do you know I’m mad?’ said Alice. ‘You must be,’ said the Cat, ‘or you wouldn’t have come here’.”
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Puzzled as to which are the sides of a round mushroom, she breaks off two pieces as far apart as she can. She shrinks at first, but before she disappears takes a bite from the other piece and grows. Unfortunately, not her whole body has grown, but only her neck, leading a pigeon to mistake her for a serpent. Alice then nibbles at different parts of the mushroom, growing a little taller and shorter each time, until she finally reaches her normal height again. Walking through the woods, she stumbles upon the house of the Duchess and witnesses a fish-faced footman hand a frog-faced footman an invitation from the Queen to play croquet.

The Grinning Cat

The Duchess's cook is busy preparing a pepper soup, but she suddenly starts hurling plates and saucepans at the head of the Duchess', who is rocking a baby to sleep. Although the Duchess is rather ungracious toward Alice, she quickly tosses the child to her, and Alice runs outside for fear of being hit by an object the cook has thrown. In her arms, the baby increasingly takes on the features of a piglet. Finally, she puts it down, and the creature trots away grunting.

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“A large rose-tree stood near the entrance of the garden: the roses growing on it
were white, but there were three gardeners at it, busily painting them red.”
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Alice now talks with the Duchess' Cheshire Cat, who has the disconcerting habit of disappearing. The cat is constantly grinning and when Alice complains of how rapidly it keeps vanishing, it disappears slowly from tail to head leaving just its lingering grin. Shortly thereafter the girl meets the March Hare, who is having tea under a tree with the Mad Hatter and the half-asleep, half-awake Dormouse. While many empty places are set at the table, the three are squeezed next to each other at one end. They give Alice a rather rude welcome, constantly complaining about her manners. In turn, she reprimands her hosts for not inviting her to sit when there are so many places. A lively and frustrating discussion ensues on the subject of time, intermixed with riddles that lack solutions.

A Memorable Croquet Match

At long last Alice grows weary of them and moves on. Much to her surprise she discovers a tree with a door leading into its trunk. Upon entering, she finds herself once again in the hall with the golden key. This time, she manages to step into the magical garden, where she meets three Gardeners who are busy painting white roses red. Alice wants to know why they would do this, and they respond that they accidentally planted a white rose tree, while the Queen had asked for a red one. They tell Alice that the Queen will have them executed for it. Alice is quite amazed that the gardeners are not human; they are playing cards.

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“‘Begin at the beginning,’ the King said, gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the
end: then stop’.”
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When the Queen shows up with her entourage, it turns out that they are all playing cards. At the Queen's prompting, Alice introduces herself. The severe ruler orders the beheading of anyone who displeases her. Alice then participates in a strange croquet game: The mallets are flamingos, rolled up hedgehogs serve as balls and playing card soldiers form the arches. One by one the Queen orders the execution of all the players for being unable to follow the confusing rules.

The Cat Refuses to Kiss the King's Hand

Alice gets more and more frightened. She's relieved when the Cheshire Cat's head appears, because it gives her someone reasonable to talk to. Delighted, she introduces the Cat to the King. Yet when the monarch demands the animal kiss his royal hand, the Cat refuses. The angered King calls over the Queen, who orders her soldiers to behead the Cat. However, that brings about an animated debate between the executioner and the Queen as to whether it's possible to behead the Cheshire Cat at all, as without a body, they can't cut the head off of anything.

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"'No, no!' said the Queen. 'Sentence first – verdict afterwards.' 'Stuff and
nonsense!' said Alice loudly. 'The idea of having the sentence first!'"
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The King wholeheartedly disagrees: He maintains that wherever there's a head it can be beheaded. Now Alice tries to mediate by suggesting that they should ask the Duchess, since she owns the Cat after all, but it turns out that the Queen has had her thrown into prison. The executioner goes off to fetch her. Meanwhile the Cat disappears totally.

The Mock Turtle Causes a Great Commotion

The Duchess is happy to see Alice again, and they engage in a deep conversation. The Duchess tries to convince Alice that there's a moral in everything that happens to you in life. The apparent harmony between Alice and the Duchess bothers the Queen, and she threatens to have the Duchess beheaded. After the Duchess flees, the croquet match continues. The Queen suggests that Alice visit the Mock Turtle and listen to its life story. The Gryphon leads her to the Mock Turtle. He indulges in lengthy reminiscences about his time at school, which annoys Alice a bit, especially when he claims to have learned a lot more than her, including "French, music and washing – extra." The encounter becomes much jollier when the Gryphon and the Turtle teach Alice how to dance the Lobster Quadrille, which involves each animal partnering with a lobster and then throwing its partner into the sea.

The Knave's Trial

The Mock Turtle turns out to be a morose creature, constantly pondering the fact that its purpose is to end up in a Mock Turtle soup. Choked with tears, he sings his last song called "The Turtle Soup." He has barely finished when a voice resounds in the distance reminding everyone that a great trial is about to begin. Alice notices that she is slowly regaining her old size. All the animals have assembled in the courtroom. The Knave of Hearts, a playing card in the Queen's service, stands accused of having stolen the tarts that the Queen baked. The King is the judge, and the White Rabbit announces the proceedings as officer of the court. After several curious depositions, Alice is called as a witness. When an absurd piece of evidence is produced – a poem that is alleged proof of the Knave of Hearts' guilt – Alice loses her temper. She denounces the trial as sheer nonsense, which makes the Queen threaten to behead Alice once more. Yet as Alice grows taller she becomes more self-confident. She dismisses them all as just a bunch of playing cards.

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"So Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a
wonderful dream it had been."
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At her words, the cards rise up and come flying down on Alice, making her scream in anger and fear – until she realizes that she's lying on the river bank and everything was but a dream. She tells her adventures to her sister, who reminds her that it is time for tea. After Alice rushes off to eat, her sister ponders Alice's future life and children, and how the story of her dream might entertain them.

About the Text

Structure and Style

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a fast-paced tale of Alice's adventures organized in twelve chapters, each of which begins with a sketch from the famous illustrator and cartoonist John Tenniel. From the very first page, the reader dives into the action with Alice, crawling into the rabbit hole and sliding into the interior of the Earth, the site of the curious adventures.

Nonsense poems and songs continually interrupt the narrative thread. Occasionally, the typeset visually accentuates the disruptions: The "long and sad tale" that the Mouse tells turns into a veritable mouse tail, with the letters undulating across the page.

Carroll combines the clarity of language and plot structure that make it easy for children to find their way through the story with sharp-witted puns and abstract thought experiments – challenging young and old readers alike. The language is often just as detached from reality as the figures in the story. Yet despite its surreal nature, Alice's inner logic remains intact until the end: It aims to use apparent childlike naiveté to expose the contradictory nature of the adult word.

Interpretation

- Lewis Carroll hides social criticism in a tale: The bizarre creatures of Wonderland reflect typical behavioral patterns of the adult world, including an exaggerated fidelity to principles and an utter lack of self-doubt and self-criticism.
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland can be read as a parable of the education crisis in the 19th century, which was based on widespread authoritarianism. Alice's schooling helps her to debunk many of the absurd convictions held by the curious inhabitants of Wonderland. Yet it is not her book knowledge that gets her through her adventures unharmed, but her childlike impartiality and unprejudiced readiness to embrace the unknown.
- The Wonderland creatures keep asking Alice about her identity, a question that the girl has great difficulties answering. It shows that people's backgrounds and prestige often trump their character and skills.
- The identity dilemma is also a symbol of puberty and the tragic loss of childhood: Alice goes through grotesque growth spurts and disproportional physical changes that bewilder her. She feels ridiculous and utterly out of place, not a child any more, but also not yet an adult.
- She comes to learn that life is a puzzle without meaning. She tries hard to find some purpose and answers in Wonderland, but in vain. Even the riddles and games of logic defy all expectations, leading to ever more confusion, frustration and nonsense.
- Starting in the 20th century, scholars have expressed considerable interest in Carroll's sexuality and its relation to his works. While there is a lack of definitive evidence, his bachelorhood and evident fascination with young girls has lent to some critics interpreting Alice's adventures through this prism. Other critics reject this element out of hand.